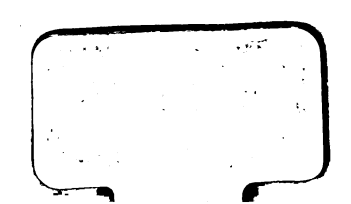




IDALIA.

I D A L I A.

A Romance.

By OUIDA.

AUTHOR OF "STRATHMORE," "CHANDOS," ETC.

" Etês-vous mon démon ou mon ange?
Je ne sais, mais je suis votre esclave."—VICTOR HUGO.

" Love, ——— not serenely pure
But strong from weakness like a chance-sown plant
Which, cast on stubborn soil, puts forth changed buds,
And softer strains unknown in happier climes."
ROBERT BROWNING.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
CHAPMAN & HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.
1867.

LONDON:
BRADBURY, EVANS, AND CO., PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

CONTENTS TO VOL. I.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

IDALIA.

CHAPTER I.

THE BORDER EAGLE.

It was a summer day late in the year in the wild moorland of the old Border.

An amber light was on the lochs, a soft mist on field and fell; the salmon-waters were leaping down from rock to rock, or boiling in the deep black pools beneath the birches; the deer were herding in the glens and wooded dips that sheltered under the Cheviot range, here, in the debatable land between the northern country and the Southrons, where Bothwell had swept with his mad Moss troopers, ere the Warden of the Marches let passion run riot for his fair White Queen, and where Belted Will's Tower still rose above its oaks, as when the bugle blast of the Howard sounded from its turrets, and the archers were marshalled against a night-raid of the Scots. On the distant seas, which once had

been dark with the galleys of Norse pirates, nothing now was in sight but a fisher-boat in the offing; on the heather-moors, which had once echoed with the beat of horses' hoofs, as Douglas or Percy had scoured through the gorse for a dashing Border fray, or a Hotspur piece of derring-do, there was only now to be heard the flap of a wild-duck's wing as the flocks rose among the sedges; and the sole monarch of earth or sky was a solitary golden eagle soaring upward to the sun.

With a single swoop the bird had come down from his eyrie among the rocks, as though he were about to drop earthward; then, lifting his head, he spread his pinions in the wind that was blowing strong and fresh from Scotland through the heat of the August day, and sailed upward gloriously with slow majestic motion through the light. Far below him lay the white-crested waves gleaming afar off, the purple stretch of the dark moors and marshes, the black still tarns, the rounded masses of the woods; higher and higher, leaving earth beneath him, he rose in his royal grandeur, fronting the sun, and soaring onward, and upward, against the blue skies and the snowy piles of clouds, rejoicing in his solitude, and kingly in his strength.

With his broad wings spread in the sun-gleam,

he swept through the silent air, his eyes looking at the luminance which blinds the eyes of men, his empire taken in the vastness of the space that monarchs cannot gauge, and his plumes stretched in all the glory of his god-like freedom, his unchained liberty of life. Far beneath him, deep down among the tangled mass of heather and brown moor grasses, glistened the lean cruel steel of a barrel, like the shine of a snake's back, pointing upward, while the eagle winged his way aloft; there, in his proud kingship with the sun, how could he note or know the steel tube, scarce larger, from his altitude, than a needle's length, of his foe, hidden deep among the gorse and reeds? The sovereign bird rose higher and higher still, in stately flight. One sharp sullen report rang through the silence; a single grey puff of smoke curled up from the heather; a death-cry echoed on the air, quivering with a human agony; the eagle wheeled once round, a dizzy circle in the summer light, then dropped down through the sunny air—stricken and dead.

Was it more murder when Cæsar fell?

The assassin rose from where he had knelt on one knee among the gorse, while his retriever started the wild-fowl up from the sedges of a pool, and strode through bracken and heath to the spot where his

science had brought down the eagle, at a distance, and with an aim, which marked him as one of the first shots in Europe. A hundred yards brought him to the place where his quarry had fallen, and he thrust the heather aside with impatient movement; he was keen in sport as a Shikari, and he had looked for no rarer game to-day than the blackcocks or the snipes, or at very best a heron from the marshes.

On the moor the King-bird lay, the pinions broken and powerless, the breast-feathers wet and bathed in blood, the piercing eyes, which loved the sun, blind and glazed with film; the life, a moment before strong, fearless, and rejoicing in the light, was gone. A feeling, new and strange, came on his slayer, as he stood there in the stillness of the solitary moor, alone with the dead eagle lying at his feet. He paused, and leaned on his rifle, looking downward:

"God forgive me. I have taken a life better than my own!"

The words were involuntary, and unlike enough to one whose superb shot had become noted from the jungles of Northern India to the ice-plains of Norway; from the bear-haunts of the Danube to the tropic forests of the Amazons. But he stood looking down on the mighty bird, while the red blood

welled through the blossoming furze, with something that was almost remorse. It looked strangely like *slaughter*, in the still golden gleam of the summer day.

If you wonder at it, wait until you see an eagle die on a solitary moorland that was his kingdom by right divine, with all the glorious liberty of life.

The skill which you would have challenged the first marksmen in Europe to have beaten, will look, for a second at least, oddly base, and treacherous, and cowardly, when the Lord of the Air lies, like carrion, at your feet.

Knee-deep in the purple heather, the destroyer leant on his gun, alone on the Scotch side of the Border, with the sea flashing like a line of silver light on his left, and the bold sweep of the Cheviot Hills fronting him. The golden eagle had fallen by no unworthy foe; he was a man of very lofty stature, and of powerful build and sinew, his muscles close knit, and his frame like steel, as became one who was in hard condition from year's end to year's end. His complexion was a clear bronze, almost as dark as an Arab's, though originally it had been fair enough; his black sweeping moustaches and beard were long, thick, and silken; his eyes, large, and very thoughtful, the hue of the

eagle's he had shot. His features were bold, proud, and frank, while his bearing had the distinction of blood, with the dash of a soldier, the reposeful stateliness of the old régime, with the alert keenness of a man used to rapid action, clear decision, coolness under danger, and the wiles of the world in all its ways. Standing solitary there on the brown heath, his form rose tall and martial enough for one of the night riders of Liddesdale, or the Knight of Snowdon himself, against the purple haze and amber light.

In the days of Chevy Chase and Flodden Field his race had been the proudest of the nobles on the Border-side, their massive keep reared in face of the Cheviots, the lands their own, over miles of rock, and gorse, and forest, lords of all the Marches stretching to the sea. Now all that belonged to him was that wild barren moorland, which gave nothing but the blackcock and the ptarmigan which bred in their wastes; and a hunting-lodge, half in ruins, to the westward, buried under hawthorn, birch, and ivy, a roost for owls and a paradise for painters.

"A splendid shot, Erceldoune; I congratulate you!" said a voice behind him.

The slayer of the golden eagle turned in surprise;

the moors, all barren and profitless though they were, were his, and were rarely trodden by any step except his own.

"Ah! your Grace? Good day. How does the Border come to be honoured by a visit from you?"

"Lost my way!" responded his Grace of Glencairne, an inveterate sportsman and a hearty, florid, stalwart man of sixty, clad in a Scotch plaid suit, and looking like a well-to-do North-country farmer. "We're staying with Fitzallayne, and came out after the black game; lost all the rest somehow, and know no more where we are than if we were at the North Pole. You're a godsend. Let me introduce my friends to you; Sir Fulke Erceldoune—Lord Polemore—Mr. Victor Vane."

The beggared gentleman raised his bonnet to the Duke's friends with much such frank soldier-like courtesy as that with which the Border lords, whose blood was in his veins, received Chatelherault and Hamilton in the wild free days of old.

"Shot an eagle, Erceldoune? By George! what a bird," cried the Duke, gazing down amazed and admiring on the murdered monarch.

"I envy you, indeed!" said his companion whom he had named as Victor Vane. "I have shot most things—men, and other birds of prey—but I never

killed an eagle, not even in the Hartz or the Engadine."

Erceldoune glanced at him.

"They are rare, and when they do appear we shoot them to ensure their scarcity! Perhaps the eagle you would wish to kill is the eagle with two heads? What sport have you had, Duke?"

"Very bad! Birds wild as the——But, God bless my soul, *your* bag's full! I say, we're nearly famished; can't you let us have something to eat at your place yonder?"

"With pleasure, sir, if your Grace can honour an owls' roost, and put up with a plain meal of cold game," said Erceldoune, as he thrust the dead king, with all his pomp of plumage torn and blood-stained, into his bag with the blackcocks, ptarmigan, wild-duck, and snipes.

"My dear fellow! I'll thank you for a crust; I'm literally starving," cried the nobleman, who was pining so wearily for his luncheon that the words "cold game" sounded to him like paradise. "And, by-the-way, if you've any of your father's Madeira left, you might feast an emperor; there wasn't such a wine connoisseur in Europe as Regency Erceldoune."

A shadow swept over the face of the golden eagle's foe as he whistled his dogs, and led the way for his guests over the moor, talking with the Duke. Vane caught the look, and smiled to himself; he thought it was because the ruined gentleman shrank from taking them to his beggared home and his unluxurious table; he erred for once. Such a petty pride was wholly impossible to the bold Border blood of Erceldoune; he would have taken them to a garret quite as cordially as to a mansion; he would have given them, Arab-like, the half of all he had with frank hospitality if that all had been only an oaten cake, and would never have done himself such mean dishonour as to measure his worth by the weight of his plate, the number of his wines, or the costliness of his soups.

True, the world, he knew well enough, only appraised men by the wealth that was in their pockets; but the world's dictum was not his deity, and with its social heart-burnings his own wandering, athletic, adventurous, and hardy life had never had much to do. He loved the saddle better than the drawing rooms, and mountain and moorland better than the lust of fame or gold.

It was not more than half a mile to the King's Rest, as the sole relic of the feudal glories of the

Border lords was named, from an old tradition dating back to one of Malcolm of Scotland's hunting raids; the place would have maddened an architect or a lover of new stucco, but it would have enraptured an archæologist or an artist. One half of it was in ruins—a mass of ivy and grey crumbling stone; the other half was of all styles of architecture, from the round quaint tower of earliest date, to the fantastic, peaked, and oriel window'd Elizabethan. Birds made their nests in most of the chimneys, holly and hawthorn grew out of the clefts in the walls, the terraces were moss-grown, and the escutcheon above the gateway was lost in a profusion of scarlet-leaved creepers. But there were a picturesqueness, a charm, a lingering grandeur it had still; it spoke of a dead race, and it had poems in every ruin, with the sun on its blazoned casements, and the herons keeping guard by its deserted weed-grown moat.

"God bless my soul! How the place has gone to rack and ruin since I was here twenty years ago!" cried the Duke, heedlessly and honestly, in blank amazement, as he stared about him.

Erceldoune smiled slightly:

"Our fortunes have gone to 'rack and ruin,' Duke."

"Ah, to be sure—yes, to be sure! Sad thing!—sad thing! No fault of yours, though, Erceldoune. Your father shouldn't have been able to touch the entail, He was a——Well, well! he's gone to his account now," said his Grace, pulling himself up short, with a perception that he was on dangerous ground, but continuing to gaze about him with a blank naïveté of astonishment. Men used to call him a "sexagenarian schoolboy;" it was too harsh, for the Duke was a thoroughly good man of business, and a manly and honest friend, but it was true that the simplicity and candour of boyhood clung very oddly to him, and a courtier or a fine gentleman his Grace of Glencairne had never become, though he was not without a frank dignity of his own when roused to it.

By an arched side-door, through a long corridor, they passed into a room in the southern and still habitable portion of the house; a long lofty room, lighted at the end with two magnificent painted windows, panelled with cedar picked out with gold, hung with some half-dozen rare pictures, a Titian, two Watteaux, a Teniers, a Van Tol, and a Memling, covered with a once rich crimson carpeting, now much worn, and with some gold and silver racing and hunting cups on the buffet. The chamber was the

relic of the lavish and princely splendour which scarce thirty years ago had been at its height in the King's Rest.

"Ah! dear me—dear me!" murmured the Duke, throwing himself into a fauteuil. "This is the old supper-room! To be sure—how well I remember George IV. sitting just there where you stand. Lord! how fond he was of your father—birds of a feather! Well, well! we might be wild, wicked dogs—we were, sir; but we had witty times of it. Regency Erceldoune was a very brilliant man, though he might be a——"

Erceldoune, with brief courtesy to the Duke, rang the bell impatiently to order luncheon, and turned to the other men:

"I hope your sport and our moorland air may have given you an appetite, for Border larders were never very well stocked, you know, except when the laird made a raid; and, unhappily, there is no 'lifting,' now-a-days, to add to our stock!"

"My dear sir!" laughed Vane, dropping his glass, through which he had been glancing at the Van Tol, "half a cold grouse when one is starving is worth all the delicacies of a Carême when one is not *in extremis*. I am delighted to make acquaint-

ance with your highly picturesque and mediæval abode; a landscape-painter would be in raptures over it, if you might wish it a trifle more water-proof!"

There was a certain dash of condescension and the suspicion of a sneer in the light careless words; if they were intended to wound, however, they missed their mark.

"'Starving on the moors' would not be so very terrific to you if you had been six days in the saddle on a handful of maize, as has chanced to me in the Pampas and the Cordilleras," said Erceldoune, curtly:——there is nothing your "mighty hunter before the Lord," who is known from the Libyan desert to La Plata, holds in more profound contempt than "small miseries."

"Eh! What? Were you talking about your father's dinners?" broke in his Grace, who, lost in his reveries as his eyes travelled over the familiar chamber, was not very clear what was said. "They were the best in Europe! I have seen Yarmouth, and Alvanley, and Talleyrand, and Charles Dix, and the best epicures we ever had, round that table; I was a very young fellow then, and the dinners were splendid, Erceldoune! He liked to outdo the king, you know, and the king liked to be outdone by him.

I don't believe he'd have gone quite the pace he did if it hadn't been for George."

Erceldoune moved impatiently; these latter royal memories connected with the King's Rest were no honour to him; they were so many brands of an extravagant vice, and a madman's ostentation, that had made him penniless, and bought a sovereign's smile with disgrace.

"I dare say, sir. I never knew any use that monarchs were yet, save in some form or another to tax their subjects."

Glencairne laughed: he had not seen much of the man who was now his host, but what he had seen he liked; the Duke abhorred the atmosphere of adulation in which, being a Duke, he was compelled to dwell, and Erceldoune's utter incapability of subservience or flattery refreshed him.

At that moment luncheon was served: the promised cold game in abundance, with some prime venison, some potted char, and a pile of superb strawberries; plain enough, and all the produce of the moorlands round, but accompanied by pure claret, and served on antique and massive plate which had been in the King's Rest for centuries, and was saved out of the total wreck of its fortunes, and at which Lord Polemore looked

envyingly; he was of the new creation, and would have given half his broad lands and vast income to have bought that "high and honourable ancientness" which was the only thing gold could not purchase for him.

"You have a feast for the gods, Erceldoune. If this be Border penury, commend me to it!" cried Glencairne, as he attacked the haunch with a hearty and absorbed attention; like Louis Seize, he would have eaten in the reporter's box at the Assembly while Suleau was falling under twenty sword-thrusts for his sake, and the Swiss Guard were perishing in the Cour Royale.

"I am sure we are infinitely indebted!" murmured Polemore, languidly, gazing at a Venetian goblet given to an Erceldoune by the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise.

"Nay, it is I who am the debtor to a most happy hazard. Try this wine," said Erceldoune, with that stately courtesy which was blent with his frank, *bref*, soldier-like manners;—sociality was not his nature, but cordial hospitality was.

The Duke looked up.

"Eh! Tokay? What, the very wine Leopold gave your father? Tiny bottles? all cobwebbed? *That's* it! The real imperial growth; can't get

it for money. Ah! how much have you got of it left?"

"But little—only a dozen or so, I believe; but of what there is I would ask the pleasure of your Grace's acceptance, if the wine find favour with you."

"Favour with me? Hear the man. Why, it's Leopold's own growth, I tell you," cried his Grace. "As for giving it away, thank you a thousand times, but I couldn't—I wouldn't rob you of it for anything."

"Indeed I beg you will, my dear Duke," said Erceldoune, with a slight smile. "To a rich man you may refuse what you like, but to a poor man you must leave the pleasure of giving when he can."

"Really, on my soul, you're very good," said the Duke, whose heart was longing after the imperial vintage. "I thank you heartily, my dear fellow; but you're too generous, Erceldoune; give your head away, like all your race!—like all your race! If your ancestors had had their hands a little less free at giving, and their heads a little longer at their expenditure, you wouldn't have this place all tumble-down as it is about you now!"

"Generosity, if I can ever make claim to it, will not imperil me. Who has nothing can lose

nothing," said Erceldoune, briefly. He did not feel particularly grateful for this discussion of his own fortunes and his father's follies before two strangers, and Vane, noticing this by tact or by chance, glided in with a question admiringly relative to a small gold salver singularly carved and filagreed.

"No, you are quite right, it is not European," answered his host, glad to turn the Duke's remarks off himself, the person he liked least to hear talked of, of any in the world. "It is Mexican. An Erceldoune who was in Cuba at the time Cortes sailed, and who went with him through all the Aztec conquest, brought it home from the famous treasures of Ayaxacotl. He bored a hole in it and slung it round his neck in the passage of the Noche Triste; there is the mark now."

"Very curious!" murmured Polemore, with a sharp twinge of jealousy; he felt it hard that this man, living in an owl's roost on a barren moor, should have had ancestors who were nobles and soldiers in the great Castilian conquest, while he, a viscount and a millionnaire, could not even tell who his fathers were at that era, but knew they had been wool-carders, drawers, butterers, cordwainers, or something horrible and unmentionable!

"Out with Cortes!" echoed Vane. "Then we have a link in common, Sir Fulke. I have some Mexican trifles that one of our family, who was a friend of Velasquez de Leon, brought from the conquest. So a Vane and an Erceldoune fought side by side at Otumba and in the temple of Huitzitopotchli? We must be friends after such an augury?"

Erceldoune bowed in silence, neither accepting nor declining the proffered alliance.

The sunlight poured through the scarlet creepers round the oriel windows into the chamber, on to the red pile of the fruit in its glossy leaves, the rich-hued plumage of the dead birds where they were hastily flung down, the gold and antique plate that was in strange contrast with the simplicity of the fare served on it; and on the dark martial head of the border-laird, where he sat with his great hounds couched about him in attitudes for Landseer. He looked, on the whole, more to belong to those daring, dauntless, fiery, steel-clad Cavaliers of the Cross, who passed with Cortes through the dark belt of porphyry into the sunlit valley of the Venice of the West, than to the present unheroic, unadventurous, unmoved, unadmiring age. Near him sat Victor Vane, a man of not more than thirty

years, rather under the middle size and slightly built; in his bearing easy and aristocratic, in feature although not by any means handsome, very attractive, with blue eyes that were always smiling with pleasant sunshine, hair of the lightest hue that glanced like silk, and a mouth as delicate as a woman's, that would have made him almost effeminate but for the long amber moustaches that shaded it, while his face, though very fair, was perfectly colourless, which lent to it the delicacy, but also the coldness, of marble.

As the two men sat together—host and guest—antagonism seemed more likely between them than alliance; and in such antagonism, if it arose, it would have been hard to say which would be the victor. In a fair and open fight, hand to hand, the blood of the Northern Countrie would be sure of conquest, and Erceldoune would gain it with the same ease and the same strength as that with which those in whose veins it had run before him had charged "through and through a stand of pikes," and stood the shock of the English lances; but in a combat of finesse, in a duel of intrigue, where the hands were tied from a bold stroke, and all the intricate moves were made in the dark, it would be a thousand to one that the bright and delicate

Southron stiletto would be too subtle for the straight stroke and dauntless chivalry of the stalwart Border steel.

At that moment a despatch was handed to Erceldoune by the single servant who lived in the King's Rest, and served him when he was there. The letter was sealed with the royal arms, and marked "On her Majesty's Service." Its contents were but two lines:

"Sir Fulke Erceldoune on service immediately. Report to-morrow by 11 A.M. at F. O."

"From the office?" asked the Duke, as his host tossed the despatch aside.

"Yes. On service immediately. East Europe, I dare say."

"Ah! the Cabinet brewing more mischief with their confounded pedagogue's pettifogging, I will bet!" cried his Grace. (The existing Government was his pet foe.) "When are you ordered?"

"To-morrow. I shall take the night express, so I shall not need to leave here till midnight," answered Erceldoune, to set at rest any fears his guests might feel that they detained him. "I wish they had sent Buller or Phil Vaughan; I wanted a month more of the deer and the blackcock; but I

must console myself with the big game in Wallachia, if I can find time."

"You serve her Majesty?" inquired Vane, who knew it well enough, as he knew all the state messengers in Europe.

"The F. O., rather," laughed Erceldoune. "Salaried to keep in saddle! Paid to post up and down the world with a state bag honoured with Havannahs, and a despatch-box marked 'Immediate,' and filled with char, chocolate, or caviare!"

"Come, come, Erceldoune, that's too bad!" laughed the Duke.

"Not a whit, sir! I went out to New York last year with royal bags imposing enough to contain the freedom of Canada, or instructions to open an American war, but which had nothing in the world in them save a dinner-service for his Excellency, and some French novels and Paris perfumes for the First Secretary."

The Duke laughed:

"Well, that will hardly be the case now. Matters are getting very serious eastward; everywhere over there the people are ripe for revolt; I expect Venetia, and Galicia, and Croatia, and all the rest of them, are meditating a rising together. I happen to know those bags you take out will contain very

important declarations from us; the Cabinet intend to send instructions to invite Turkey, command her rather, to——"

"My dear Duke, it is not for me to know *what* I take out; it is sufficient that I deliver it safely," laughed Erceldoune, to check the outpourings of his Grace's garrulous tongue. "I am no politician and diplomatist, as you know well. I prefer hard riding to soft lying in either sense of the word."

"Wish everybody else did!" said the Duke. "If men would keep to their own concerns and live as they ought, with plenty of sport and fresh air, everything would go smoothly enough. There'd be no marring or meddling then; as for this Cabinet, it's just what Clarendon said of Bristol: 'For puzzling and spoiling a thing, there was never his equal.' If the despatches you will carry to Moldavia don't embroil Europe, it won't be his fault, but there'll be sure to be a postscript to 'em all, meaning, 'N.B. In no case will *we* fight!'"

"Who is severe now, Duke? On my honour, you will make me feel as if I were Discord incarnate flying over Europe with her firebrand. I never took so poetic a side of the service before."

He strove to arrest the reckless course of incautious revelations of the intentions in high places,

but it was useless. The Scotch Duke was off on the Foreign Office ill-deeds, and no power could have stopped him; no power did until he had fairly talked himself hoarse, when he drank a deep glass of claret, and rose, with reiterated thanks for his impromptu entertainment as sincere as they were voluble, and with cordial invitation to his castle of Benithmar, a stately pile upon the Clyde.

"And I hope you will allow me also to return your hospitalities in kind," said Vane, with his brightest smile. "Since you have the mania of *pérégrinomanie*, as Guy Patin calls it, and are always going up and down Europe, you must pass continually through Paris. I can only hope, both there and in Naples, you will very soon allow me the pleasure of showing you how much I hold myself the debtor both for the hospitality of to-day, and the acquaintance to which it has been so fortunate for me as to lead."

Erceldoune bent his head, and thanked him courteously but briefly—he had no love for honeyed speeches—and offered them, as a modern substitute for the stirrup-cup, some cigars of purest flavour, brought over by himself from the West Indies.

"How does Mr. Vane come in your Grace's society?" he asked the Duke, as he accompanied

them across his own moor to put them *en route* for Lord Fitzallayne's, the two others having fallen slightly behind them.

"How? Eh? Why—I don't know—because he's staying at Fitz's, to be sure.

"Staying there!"

"Yes. Fitz swears by him, and all the women are in love with him, though he's a pale insignificant face, to my thinking. What do you know of him? Anything against him—eh?"

"Sufficiently *about* him to advise you, if you will allow me, not to let him glean from you the private intentions and correspondence of the ministry, or any instructions they may have given their representatives abroad. Only talk to him on such matters generally; say no more to him than what the public knows."

"What? Ah! indeed. I apprehend you. I thank you, sir—I thank you," said his Grace, hurriedly, conscious that he had been somewhat indiscreet, but curious as any old gossip in a Bréton knitting and spinning gossipry. "But he stands very well; he comes of good blood, I think. He is a gentleman; you meet him at the best Courts abroad."

"Possibly."

"Then what the deuce is there against him?"

"I am not aware that I said there was anything. Simply, I know his character; I know he is an adventurer—a political adventurer—associated with the ultra parties in Italy and Hungary. I do not think his social status is anything very remarkable, and I repeat my advice: do not take him into political confidence."

"If the man can't be trusted, the man's a blackguard!"

"My dear Duke! *la haute politique* will not admit of such simplifications. A man may be a great man, a great minister, a great patriot, but all the same he may be—politically speaking—a great cheat! Indeed, is there a statesman who is not one?"

"True, true—uncomfortably true," growled his Grace; "but of Victor Vane—what's there against him? What do you know—what would you imply?"

"I 'imply' nothing; it is the most cowardly word in the language. I know very little, and that little I have said to place your Grace on your guard; and it is no secret; Mr. Vane is well known abroad to be the determinate foe of Austria, and to be widely involved in political intrigues. Of his career I know no further; and of what I have said he is

welcome to hear every word," said Erceldoune, with a dash of decision and impatience, while he paused and pointed to a road running round a bend of grey gorse-covered rock beside a brown and rapid moor stream, which would lead them by a short cut across the fells homewards.

There they parted in the bright warm August afternoon, as the sun began to sink towards the westward; his guests soon lost to sight behind the wild woodland growth of the half savage glen, while the last of the Border lords turned backward to his solitary and ruined homestead, sweeping over the heather with the easy swinging step of the bred mountaineer, followed by his brace of staghounds and two black and tan setters.

"Salaried to keep in saddle! Paid to post up and down Europe!" he had said, with a certain disdain, for Erceldoune was nothing more or less than a Queen's messenger; a State courier, bound to serve at a State summons; holding himself in readiness for Russia or Teheran, for ice-fields or sun-scorched tropics, for the swamps of Mexico or the rose plains of Persia, at a second's notice. But he suited the life, and the life suited him; for he was a keen sportsman, and the first rider in Europe; was

equally at his ease in an Arab camp and a Paris café, in a Polish snow-storm, with the wolves baying in wrath and famine about the sleigh, and in the chancellérie of a British plenipotentiary over the dainty dishes of a First Secretary's dinner; and had an iron constitution, a frame steeled to all changes of climate or inroads of fatigue, and that coolness under close peril, and utter indifference to personal indulgence, which made him renowned in the messenger service, and as much at home in the Desert as a Sheikh. Indeed, the Desert life could not have been bolder, and freer, and simpler than that which Erceldoune had led from his boyhood, partly from nature, partly from habit; he had as much of the barbaric chief in him as he had of the man of the world.

His father—Regency Erceldoune, as he was called, from his alliance with "the mad Prince and Poynings"—had been a gambler, a debauchee, and a drunkard, though a gentleman with it all. Such orgies as George Rex had at the Cross Deep, his friend and favourite had at King's Rest, mad, witty, riotous, and shameless as the worst days of lascivious Rome. Lands and money went in them till there were neither left; and his son, brought to them and taught them, while he was nothing but a child, had sickened of the vice in which he was

steeped as thoroughly as, had he been brought up by precisians, he would have craved and loved it. He saw men levelled with brutes, and made far more bestial than the beasts; and his nature reared itself out of the slough, and refused the slavery of sensuality. If he were too early contaminated, he was all the earlier revolted.

When he was twenty-two his father died; and he was left the last Master of King's Rest (by the old title long dropped in desuetude), with some miles of moorland and a beggared fortune, not a single relative, and not a chance of a career. A certain wild and witty peer, who had been prominent in the orgies of the Roissy of the Border—saying nothing to him, for the Erceldoune stock was famous for a pride, which perished rather than bend—got him offered a messengership; and his first meeting with officials at the Foreign Office was characteristic, and had not a little influence on his career. In the Board-room, at the hour when he was being received by those sleepy and solemn personages the Heads of a Department, there lounged in a minister, as celebrated for his cheery and facetious humour as for his successful and indomitable statesmanship; for his off-hand good nature as for his foreign policies. The Heads bowed submissive

before my lord; my lord gave his rapid, lucid orders, and, as he was lounging out again, put up his eye-glass at Erceldoune.

"Messengership? We've too many messengers already," he said, cutting in two the reply of the Board to his interrogation. "Only ride over one another's way, and lose half the bags among them. Who are you, sir?"

"Fulke Erceldoune," said the Border lord, with no birthright but some barren acres of heather, returning the great Minister's stare as calmly and as haughtily; insolence he would not have brooked from an emperor.

"Erceldoune! God bless my soul, your father and I were like brothers once," said his lordship, breaking off his sharp autocratic cross-examination for the *sans façon* good-hearted familiarity of tone, most usual and congenial to him. "Not a very holy fraternity either! Monks of Medmenham! Who sent you up for a messengership? Lord Longbourn? Ah! very happy to appoint you. Go in for your examination as soon as you like."

"I thank you, my lord, no. You have said, 'You have too many messengers already.'"

The minister stared a minute, and then laughed.

"Pooh, pooh! Never mind what I said! If

you're like what your father was, you won't complain of a sinecure."

The boy-master of King's Rest bowed to the cabinet councillor.

"I am *not* what he was; and I do not take money from the State, if the State do not need my services. I did not come here to seek a pension!"

The great statesman stared at him a second with a blank amazement; his condescension had never met with such a rebuff and such a scruple in all his length of years and of office. The grave and reverend Heads that bent to the earth in docility and servility before the Foreign Secretary, gazed at the offender with such horror of reprobation as the members of the Inquisition might have bestowed on a blasphemer who had reviled the Host and rebelled against the Holy See. Erceldoune stood his ground calmly and indifferently; he had said simply what he meant, and, in the pride of his youth and his ruin, he was grandly careless whether he had closed the door of every career upon himself, and condemned himself to starve for life on his profitless acres of tarne and gorse.

The Minister looked at him, with his keen blue eyes reading the boy through and through; then a rich humour lighted up their glittering azure light,

and he laughed aloud—a mellow, ringing, Irish mirth, that startled all the drowsy echoes and pompous stillness of Downing-street.

"You hit hard and straight, my young Sir Fulke? Very dangerous habit, sir, and very expensive: get rid of it! Go before the commissioners to-morrow, and pass your examination. I'll give you an attachéship, if you like it better, but I don't think you'll do for diplomacy! I shall see you again. Good day to you."

The minister nodded, and left the Board-room with as much dash and lightness in his step when he ran down-stairs, as if he were still a Harrow boy; and, in that two minutes' interview in the Foreign Office, Erceldoune had made a friend for life in one who—if he had a short political memory, and took up policies, or treaties, and dropped them again with a charming facility and inconstancy, as occasion needed—was adored by every man he employed, and was as loyal to his personal friendships as he was staunch to his personal promises.

True to his word, he gave Erceldoune his choice of an attachéship, a messengership, a commission, or one of those fashionable and cozy appointments in Downing-street where younger sons and patrician protégés yawn, make their race books, discuss the

points of demi-reps and rosières, circulate the last epigram round the town, manufacture new and sublimated liqueur recipes, and play at baccarat or chicken hazard in the public service. Erceldoune took the messengership; from a motive which strongly coloured his character and career even then—honour.

His father, deep in a morass of embarrassments, had lived like a prince of the blood; his son had taken, in sheer revulsion, an utter abhorrence of all debt. He had been steeped in dissolute vices and lawless principles from his earliest years; and the mere wildness of men of his own years looked childish, and was without charm, beside the orgies through which he had passed his noviciate while yet in his youngest boyhood. He had seen men of richest wit, highest powers, brightest talents, noblest blood, suddenly disappear into darkness and oblivion, to drag on an outlawed life in some wretched continental town, through that deadly curse of usury, which had given their heritage to the Hebrews, and let them glitter leaders of fashion for a decade, only to seize their lives more surely at the last; and he had sworn never to give his own life over to the keeping of that vampire which lulls us into an opium-like dream for one short hour, to

drain our best blood drop by drop with its brute fangs and its insatiate thirst. Had he gone into the army, where his own wishes would have led him, or had he taken one of the diplomatic or civil fashionable appointments offered him, the circles into which he would have been thrown must have flung him into debt, and into every temptation to it, however he might have resisted: he must have lived as those about him lived; the mere bare necessities of his position would have entailed embarrassments from which the liberty of his nature revolted as from a galley-slave's fetters. In Erceldoune's creed a landless gentleman was worthy of his blood so long as he was free—no longer.

Therefore he entered the messenger service; and, on the whole, the life, which he had now led for about a score of years, suited him as well as any, save a soldier's, could have done; the constant travel, the hard riding, the frequent peril, the life of cities alternating with the life of adventure—these were to his taste. And while in the capitals of Europe there was not a woman who could beguile, or a man who could fool him, the Mexican guachos found in him a rider fleet and fearless as themselves; the French Zéphyrs knew in him a volunteer, fiery and elastic as any their bat-

talions held; the fishers of Scandinavia had lived with him through many a blinding icy midnight sea-storm; the Circassians had feasted and loved him in their mighty mountain strongholds; and the Bedaweens welcomed as one of themselves the Frank, who rode as they rode, without heeding the scorch of the brazen skies and sands; who could bring down a vulture on the wing whirling right betwixt his sight and the burning sun, a black speck on the yellow glare; who could live like themselves, if needs be, on a draught of water and a handful of maize or of dates, and who cared for no better bed than their desert solitudes, with his saddle beneath his head, and the desert stars shining above.

Love he had known little of; no human life had ever become necessary to his, or ever obtained the slightest sway over, or hold upon, his own; in this he was exceptionally fortunate. What were dear to him were those profitless, useless moorland wastes of heath and heron-creeks, of yellow gorse, and brown still pools, the sole relics of his barren Border heritage, and which self-denial and renunciation had kept free from claim or burden.

The sun was shining full on the King's Rest as he returned, and he leaned over the low gate of the stable entrance, looking at the ivy-hidden ruins,

which were all which remained to him of the possessions of a race that had once been as great as the Hamilton, the Douglas, or the Græme, and of which an empty title alone was left him, as though to make his poverty and its decay more marked. These did not often weigh on him; he cared little for riches, or for what they brought; and in the adventure and the vigour of a stirring wandering life there were a richness of colouring and a fullness of sensation which, together with a certain simplicity of taste and habit that was natural to himself, prevented the pale hues and narrow lines of impoverished fortunes from having place or note. But now the Duke's words had recalled them; and he looked at the King's Rest with more of melancholy than his dauntless and virile nature often knew. There, over the lofty gateway, where the banner of a great feudal line had floated, the scarlet leaves of the Virginian parasite alone were given to the wind. In the moat, where on many a summer night the night-riders had thundered over the bridge to scour hill and dale with the Warden of the Marches, there were now but the hoot of the heron, the nests of the water-rat, and the thick growth of sedges and water-lilies. In the chambers where James IV. had feasted, and Mary Stuart rested, and Charles

Edward found his loyalest friends and saftest refuge, the blue sky shone through the open rafters, and the tattered tapestry trembled on the walls, and the fox and the bat made their coverts; the grand entrance, the massive bastions, the stately towers which had been there when the bold Border chieftains rode out to join the marching of the clans, had vanished like the glories of Alnaschar's dream, all that remained to tell their place a mound of lichen-covered ruin, with the feathery grasses waving in the breeze;—it was the funeral pile of a dead race.

And the last of their blood, the last of their title, stood looking at it in the light of the setting sun with a pang at his heart.

"Well! better so than built up with dishonoured gold! The power and the pomp are gone, but the name at least is stainless," thought Erceldoune, as he looked away from the dark and shattered ruins of his heritage, across the moorland, golden with its gorse, and towards the free and sunlit distance of the seas, stretching far and wide.

CHAPTER II.

HAVING BROKEN HIS BREAD.

"WHAT did you think of that man?" said Lord Polemore to Victor Vane that evening over his coffee in the drawing-rooms, out of the Duke's hearing.

"Think of him? think of him? Well!—I think he will die a violent death."

"Good gracious!" said the peer, with a little shiver. Why?"

"I never analyse!" laughed Victor, softly. "I think so,—because I think so. He will get shot in a duel, perhaps, for saying some barbaric truth or other in the teeth of policy."

"Who is that you are prophesying for with such charmingly horrible romance?" asked a very pretty woman.

"Fellow we met on the moor," answered Polemore. "Queer fellow! Beggar, you know,—holes

in the carpets, rats in the rooms,—and yet, on my honour, Venice goblets and Mexican gold! Absurd!"

"What! a beggar with holes in his coat and rats in his pockets with Venice glass and Mexican ingots!" cried the beautiful blonde, who had been listening languidly.

"No, no! Not *that* sort of beggar, you know," interposed the peer. "Man that lives in a lot of ruins. Messenger fellow—lunched with him to-day. Wretched place; only fit for bats; no household, no cook, no anything; odious dungeon! And yet, on my word, if the fellow isn't ridiculous enough to serve up his dry bread on gold salvers, and pour his small beer into Cinque Cento glasses!"

"Come! we had very fair wine considering it was a Barmecide's feast," laughed Vane.

"Height of absurdity, you know!" went on Polemore, waxing almost eloquent under the spurs of the twinges of envy he had felt while at luncheon. "Fancy, Lady Augusta! here's a man nothing but a courier, he says himself, always racing up and down Europe with bags; so hard up that he has to shoot for himself everything that he eats, and living in a wretched rat-hole I wouldn't turn a dog into; yet keeps gold and silver things fit for a prince, and

tells you bombastical stories about his ancestors having been caciques of Mexico! For my part, I don't doubt he stole them all!"

"Bravo! Bravissimo!" laughed Victor Vane. "And what is much more, Lady Augusta, this Border savage wears deer-skins in the rough, 'lifts' cattle when the moon's dark, and has a fricassee of young children boiling in a cauldron. Quite *à l'antique*, you see!"

"But who *is* the creature?" asked the lady, a little bewildered, a little interested, and a good deal amused.

"Oh—let me see—ah! he calls himself Fulke Erceldoune," said Polemore, with an air of never having heard the title, and of having strong reasons for believing it a false one.

A man standing near, turned at the name.

"Fulke? You are talking of Fulke Erceldoune? Best fellow in the world, and has the handsomest strain of black-tan Gordon setters, bred on the Regent and Rake cross, going anywhere."

"Oh—ah—do you know him, then?" murmured Polemore, a little discomfited.

"Rather! First steeple-chaser in the two countries; tremendous pots always on him. Know him!—ask the Shire men. Saved my life, by the

way, last year—fished me out of the Gulf of Spezzia, when I was all but spent; awful tempest at the time; very nearly drowned himself. Is he here, do you say?"

"He's at that wretched rat-hole of his," grumbled Polemore, sorely in wrath.

"King's Rest? Didn't know that. Go and see him to-morrow."

"What remarkably conflicting statements!" murmured Lady Augusta, with languid amusement. "A beggar and a savage!—a preux chevalier and a paladin of chivalry! Singular combination this—what is it?—Fulke Erceldoune."

"Nay," laughed Vane, "it was a combination common enough in the old days of chivalry, and our friend seems to me better suited to the Cinque Cento than the present century. Just the sort of man to have been a Knight Templar with Cœur de Lion, or an adventurer with Pizarro, with no capital and no credit but his Toledo blade."

"Trash!" said the absent man's defender, with impatient disdain that almost roused him into energy, "Erceldoune is a splendid fellow, Lady Augusta. I only wish you could see him ride to hounds. In saddle; in sport; on a yacht deck in a storm; with any big game you like—pigs, bisons,

tigers; swimming in the Turkish waters in mid-winter; potting lions with the Kabyles and the Zouaves—put him where you will, he's never at a loss, never beaten, and can do more than twenty men put together. Dash and science, you know; when you get the two together, they always win. As for money—all the good old names are impoverished now, and it's the traders only who have any gilding."

With which fling at Polemore—whose fathers were of the Cottonocracy—the champion, something disgusted at having been entrapped into such a near approach to anything like interest and excitement, turned away, and began to murmur pretty nothings, in the silkiest and sleepiest of tones, into the ear of a Parisian marquise.

"Extreme readiness to break your neck, and extreme aptitude for animal slaughter, always appear to be the English criterion of your capabilities and your cardinal virtues," murmured Vane, with his low light laugh, while Polemore, sulkily aggrieved, muttered to himself:

"Man that's a beggar to keep Mexican things and have his bare bones served up on gold dishes—ridiculous, preposterous! If he's so poor, he must be in debt; and if he's in debt he ought to sell

them, out of common honesty. Cheats his creditors—clearly cheats his creditors!"

And so—having broken his bread and eaten his salt—they talked of him: there are a few rude nomad Arab virtues that have died out with civilisation; and the Sheikh will keep faith and return your hospitalities better than Society.

That evening, a Dalmatian, who was the body-servant of Victor Vane, a very polished and confidentially useful person, rode over to the little station nearest Lord Fitzallayne's, and sent a telegram, which he read from a slip of paper, to Paris. It ran thus, save that it was in a polyglot jumble of languages which would have defied any translation without a key:

"The Border Eagle flies eastward. Clip the last feather of the wing. Only La Picciola. Idalia or pearls of lead, as you like. Take no steps till beyond the King's. Then make sure, even if—— White coats in full muster; Crescent horns up; Perfide, as usual, brags but won't draw. N.B. The Eagle will give you beak and talons."

Which, simply translated, meant—

"Erceldoune, Queen's Courier, will take the F.O. bags into the Principalities. Relieve him of the last despatches he has with him. We only want

the smallest bag. I leave you to choose how to manage this; either with a successful intrigue or a sure rifle-shot. Do not stop him till he is beyond Turin. Secure the papers, even if you have to take his life to get them. The Austrians are in strong force everywhere; matters in Turkey, as regards the Principalities, are against us; England, as usual, bullies, but will not be drawn into a war. N.B. This Erceldoune will give you trouble, and fight hard."

And being translated by the recipient in all its intricacies of implication and command, would mean far more.

The tired telegraph clerk, who yawned and did nothing all day long in the little out-of-the-world Border station, save when he sent a message for the lodge to town, rubbed his heavy eyes, stared, told off the jumbled Babel of phrases with bewildered brain, and would barely have telegraphed them all in due order and alphabet but for the dexterous care of the Dalmatian.

While the message was being spelled out, the night-express dashed into the station, with red lamps gleaming through the late moonless night, and its white steam cloud flung far out on the gloom, flashing on its way from Edinburgh across the

Border land,—a tall man, dressed in a dark loose coat of soft Canadian furs, with a great cheroot in his mouth, ran up the station stairs, and threw down his gold:

"First class to town;—all right."

He took his ticket, flung open a door of an unoccupied carriage, and threw himself into a seat with the rapidity of one used never to idle time and never to be kept waiting by others, and the train, with a clash and a clang, darted out into the darkness, plunging down into the gloom as into the yawning mouth of Avernus, its track faintly told by the wraith-like smoke of the wreathing steam and the scarlet gleam of the signal-lamps.

The Dalmatian had looked after him with some curiosity:

"Who is that?" he asked the clerk.

"Erceldoune, of the King's Rest. He is a Queen's messenger, you know, always rushing about at unearthly times, like a wandering Jew. I say, what the dickens is that word; Arabic, ain't it?"

The Dalmatian, with a smile, looked after the train, then turned and spelt out the words.

"Such gibberish! If that ain't a rum start somehow or other, I'm a Dutchman," thought the tele-

graphist, with a yawn, returning to his dog-eared green-covered shilling novel, relating the pungent adventures of a soiled dove of St. John's Wood, and showing beyond all doubt—if anybody ever doubted it yet—that virtue, after starving on three-halfpence a shirt, will be rewarded with pneumonia and the parish shell, while vice eats her truffles, drinks her wines, and retires with fashionable toilettes, and a competence, to turn repentant and respectable at leisure. Meanwhile, the night-express rushed on through silent hills, and sleeping hamlets, over dark water-pools and through bright gaslit cities, and above head the electric message flashed, outstripping steam, and flying, like a courier of the air, towards France before the man it menaced.

With noon on the morrow the best-known messenger in the service reported himself at the Foreign Office, received despatches for Paris, Turin, and Jassy, and started with the F. O. bags as usual express.

Had any prophet told him that as he lay back in the mail-train, with a curled silver Eastern pipe coming out of his waving beard, and papers of critical European import in the white bags lying at his feet, Chance was drifting him at its wanton caprice as idly and as waywardly as the feathery

smoke it floated down on the wind, Erceldoune would have contemptuously denied that Chance could ever affect a life justly balanced and rightly held in rein. He would have said Chance was a deity for women, fatalists, and fools; a Fetish worshipped by the blind. The Border chiefs of the King's Rest had believed in the might of a strong arm and in the justice cleft by a long two-edged sword, and left weaklings to bow to Hazard:—and the spirit of their creed was still his.

Yet he might have read a lesson from the death of the moorland eagle;—one chance shot from the barrel hid in the heather, and power, strength, liberty, keen sight, and lordly sovereignty of solitude were over, and the king-bird reeled and fell!

But to draw the parable would not have been at all like his vigorous nature;—a state courier has not much habitude or taste for Oriental metaphors and highly-spiced romances, and he had too much of the soldier, the Shikari, the man of the world and the Arab combined, to leave him anything whatever of the poet or the dreamer. Men of action may have grave, but they never have visionary thoughts, and life with Erceldoune was too gallant, strong, and rapid a stream—ever in incessant motion, though calm enough, as deep waters mostly are—

to leave him leisure or inclination to loiter lingeringly or dreamily upon its banks. Reflection was habitual to him, imagination was alien to him.

By midnight he reached Paris, and left his despatches at the English Embassy. There was no intense pressure of haste to get Turin-wards so long as he was in the far Eastern Principalities by the Friday, and he waited for the early mail train to the South, instead of taking a special one, as he would otherwise have done, to get across the Alps. If a few hours were left under his own control in a city, Erceldoune never slept them away; he slept in a railway carriage, a travelling carriage, on deck, in a desert, on a raft rushing down some broad river that made the only highway through Bulgarian or Roumelian forests—anywhere where novelty, discomfort, exposure, or danger would have been likely to banish sleep from most men; but in a city he neglected it with an independence of that necessity of life which is characteristic of the present day. There is a café, whether in the Rue Lafitte, Rivoli, Castiglione, or La Paix, matters not; here, in the great gilded salon, with its innumerable mirrors and consoles and little oval tables, or in the little cabinets, with their rosewood and gilding, and green velvet and rose satin, if there be a bouquet to be tossed down

on the marble slab, and the long eyes of a Laure or Agläe to flash over the wines, while a pretty painted fan taps an impatient rataplan or gives a soft blow on the ear—may be found after midnight a choice but heterogeneous gathering. Secretaries of all the legations, Queen's messengers, Charivari writers, Eastern travellers, great feuilletonists, great artists, princes if they have any wit beneath their purples, authors of any or all nations—all, in a word, that is raciest, wittiest, and, in their own sense, most select in Paris, are to be met with at the Café Minuit, if you be of the initiated. If you be not, you may enter the café of course, since it is open to all the world, and sup there off what you will, but you will still remain virtually outside it.

Erceldoune was well known here: it is in such republics only that a man is welcomed for what he is, and what he has done—not for what he is worth. He was as renowned in Paris because he was so utterly unlike the Parisians, as he was renowned in the East because he so closely resembled the Arabs; and he entered the Café Minuit for the few hours which lay between his arrival at the Embassy and his departure for Turin.

None of his own special set had dropped in just then; indeed, there were but few of them in Paris.

As he sat at his accustomed table, glancing through a journal, and with the light from the gaselier above shed full on his face—a face better in unison with drooping desert-palms, and a gleaming stand of rifles, and the dusky glow of a deep sunset on Niger or on Nile, for its setting and background, than with the gilt arabesques and florid hues and white gaslight of a French café—a new comer, who had entered shortly afterwards and seated himself at the same table, addressed him on some topic of the hour, and pushed him an open case of some dainty scented cigarettes.

Erceldoune courteously declined them: he always smoked his own Turkish tobacco, and would as soon have used cosmetiques as perfumed cigars; and, answering the remark, looked at the speaker. He was accustomed to read men thoroughly and rapidly, even if they carried their passports in cipher. What he saw opposite him was a gracefully made man, of most picturesque and brilliant beauty of a purely foreign type, with the eyes long, dark, and melting, and features perfectly cut as any cameo's—a man who might have sat to a painter for Lamoral d'Egmont, or for one of Fra Moreale's reckless nobly-born Free Lances, and might have passed for five-and-thirty at the most, till he who

should have looked closely at the lines in the rich reckless beauty, and caught a certain look in the lustrous half-veiled eyes, would have allotted him, justly, fifteen full years more.

Erceldoune gave him one glance, and though there was little doubt about his type and his order, he had known men of both by the hundreds.

"Paris is rather empty, monsieur? Sapristi! The asphalte in August would be too much for a salamander," pursued the stranger, over his bouillabaisse. He spoke excellent French, with a mellifluous southern accent, not of France.

Erceldoune assented. Like all travellers or men used to the world, he liked a stranger full as well as a friend for a companion—perhaps rather the better; but he was naturally silent, and seldom spoke much, save when strongly moved or much prepossessed by those whom he conversed with: then he would be eloquent enough, but that was rare.

"Thousands come to Paris this time of the year, but only to pass through it, as I daresay you are doing yourself, monsieur?" went on the Greek, if such he were, as Erceldoune judged him by the eyes and the features, worthy of Phidias' chisel, rarely seen without some Hellenic blood.

"For the season the city is tolerably full; travel-

lers keep it so, as you say," answered Erceldoune, who was never to be entrapped into talking of himself.

"It is a great mistake for people to travel in flocks, like swallows and sheep," said his vivacious neighbour, whose manners were very careless, graceful, and thoroughly polished, if they had a dash of the Bohemian, the Adventurer, and the Free Lance. "A terrible mistake! Overcrowds the inns, the steamers, and the railway carriages; thins the soups, doubles the price of wines, and teaches guides to look on themselves as luxuries, to be paid for accordingly; makes a Nile sunset ridiculous by being witnessed by a mob; and turns Luxor and Jupiter Ammon into dust and prose by having a tribe of donkeys and dragomen rattled over their stones. A fearful mistake! If you are social and gregarious, stay in a city; but if you are speculative and Ishmaelesque, travel in solitude. Eh, monsieur?"

"If you can find it. But you have to travel far to get into solitudes in these days. Have you seen this evening's *Times?*"

"A thousand thanks! Wonderful thing, your *Times!* Does the work in England that secret police do in Vienna, spies and bayonets do here,

and confetti to the populace and galleys to the patriots do in Rome."

"Scarcely! The *Times* would rather say it prevents England's having need of any of those continental arguments," said Erceldoune, as he tossed the brandy into his coffee.

The other laughed, as from under his lashes he flashed a swift glance at the Queen's Messenger. He would have preferred it if there had been less decision about the broad, bold, frank brow, and less power in the length of limb stretched out, and the supple wrist, as it lay resting on the marble slab of the café-table.

"Basta! Governments should give the people plenty to eat and plenty to laugh at; they would never be troubled with insurrections then, or hear anything more about 'liberty!' A sleek, well-fed, happy fellow never turned patriot yet; he who takes a dagger for his country only takes it because he has no loaf of bread to cut with it, or feels inclined to slit his own throat. Make corn and meat cheap, and you may play tyrant as you like."

"A sound policy, and a very simple one."

"All sound things are simple, monsieur! It is the sham and rotten ones that want an intricate scaffolding to keep them from falling; the perfect

arch stands without girders. 'Panem et Circenses' will always be the first article of good governments; when the people are in good humour they never seethe into malcontents."

"Then I suppose you would hold that cheap provisions and low taxes would make us hear no more of this present cry of 'nationalities?'" His companion was piquant in his discourse and polished in his style, but he did not particularly admire him; and when he did not admire people, he had a way of holding them at arm's length.

"'Nationalities?' Ridiculous prejudices! Myths that would die to-morrow, only ministers like to keep a handy reason on the shelf to make a raid on their neighbour, or steal an inch or two of frontier when the spirit moves them," laughed the other, and his laugh was a soft silvery chime, very pleasant to the ear. "Pooh! a man's nationalities are where he gets the best wage and the cheapest meat, specially in these prosaic profoundly practical times, when there is no chivalry, no dash, no colour; when the common-place thrives; when we turn Egyptian mummies into railway fuel, and find Pharaoh's dust make a roaring fire; when we change crocuses into veratrin for our sore-throats, and violets into sweetmeats for our eating! A detestable age, truly.

Fancy the barbarism of crystallising and crunching a violet! The flower of Clémence Isaure, and all the poets after her, condemned to the degradation of becoming a bonbon! Can anything be more typical of the prosaic atrocity of this age? Impossible!"

"With such acute feelings, you must find the dinner-card excessively restricted. With so much sympathy for a violet, what must be your philanthropy for a pheasant!" said Erceldoune, quietly, who was not disposed to pursue the Monody of a Violet in the Café Minuit, though the man to a certain extent amused him.

At that moment the foreigner rose a little hastily, left his ice-cream unfinished, and, with a gay graceful adieu, went out of the salon, which was now filling. "A handsome fellow, and talks well," thought Erceldoune, wringing the amber Moselle from his long moustaches, when he was left alone at the marble table in the heat, and light, and movement of the glittering café. "I know the fraternity well enough, and he is one of the best of the members, I dare say. He did not waste much of his science on me; he saw it would be profitless work. On my word, the wit and ability and good manners those men fritter away in their

order would make them invaluable in a Chancellerie, and fit them for any State office in the world."

The First Secretary of the English Legation and a French diplomatist entered and claimed his attention at that instant, and he gave no more thought to the champion of the crystallised flowers, whom, justly or wrongly as it might chance, he had classed with the renowned Legion of Chevaliers d'Industrie, and whose somewhat abrupt departure he had attributed either to his own lack of promise as a plausible subject for experimentalising upon, or to the appearance on the scene of some *mouchard* of the Secret Bureau, whom the vivacious bewailer of the fate of sugared violets in this age of prose did not care to encounter.

Erceldoune thought no more of him then and thenceforward: he would have thought more had the mirrors of the Café Minuit been Paracelsus' or Agrippa's mirours of grammarye.

The long console-glass, with its curled gas-branches and its rose-hued draperies, and its reflex of the gilding, the glitter, the silver, the damask, the fruit, the wines, and the crowds of the Paris café, would have been darkened with night-shadows and deep forest foliage, and the tumult of close struggles for life or death, and the twilight hush of

cloistered aisles, and the rich glow of Eastern waters, and the silent gloom of ancient God-forgotten cities; and, from out the waving, shadowy, changing darkness of all, there would have looked a woman's face, with fathomless, luminous eyes, and hair with a golden light upon it, and a proud, weary, sorceress smile on the lips—the face of a temptress or of an angel?

But the mirror had no magic of the future; the glass reflected nothing save the gas-jets of the ormolu sconces; and Fulke Erceldoune sat there in Paris that night, drinking his iced Rhine wines, and smoking his curled Arabian meerschaum, knowing nothing of what lay before him, a blind wanderer in the twilight, a traveller in strange countries, as we are at best in life.

CHAPTER III.

"SOUFFRIR EN ROI.'

HEAVEN forbid that the Principalities should be better governed: they would be like all the rest of the world in no time. They may be ruinous to themselves very probably, and a nest of internecine discord for Eastern Europe; but they are delightful for the stranger, and the bird of passage should surely have one solitude left wherein to find rest; regions where the refined tortures of the post cannot reach; where debts can be defied and forgotten across the stretch of those dense pine-woods which sever you from the rest of mankind; where the only highway to your quarters is a rapid surging river, with a timber-raft drifting down it; where, whirled along by gipsy horses and gipsy drivers through vast wooded tracks, you halt and wake with a pleasant wonder to find yourself in the broad streets and squares of a populous city, of which, though you are not more geographically ignorant than your brethren,

you had not the haziest notion, and whose very name you do not know when you hear it, waking at the cessation of the horses' gallop and the gipsey Jehu's shouts, to open your eyes upon the clear Moldavian or Wallachian night, with the sound of music from some open casement above. Regions such as these are the Principalities, and who would not keep them so, from the Danube to the Dneister, from the Straits of Otranto to the Euxine, for the refuge of necessitous wanderers who have an inconvenient connection, a tiresome run upon them from the public, or a simple desire for a paradise where a woman will not follow them, where letters will not come, where the game districts are unbeaten, and the deep woods and wild valleys as yet unsketched and unsung?

Through the Principalities, Erceldoune travelled in as brief a time, from the early dawn when he had left Paris, as mail trains, express specials, rapid relays of horses, and swift river passages could take him, across Tyrol and Venetia, Alps and Carpathians, Danube and Drave, calling at Belgrade with despatches, and pushing straight on for Moldavia. Every mile of that wild and unworn way was as familiar to the Queen's Messenger as the journey between London and Paris is familiar to other men.

Where steam had not yet penetrated, and there was no choice but between posting and the saddle, he usually rode; if the roads were level, and the route unsighly, he would take the luxurious rest of a "Messenger's carriage," and post through the nights and days; but, by preference, hard riding carried him over most of his ground, with pace and stay that none in the service could equal, and which had made the Arabs, when their horses swept beside his through the eastern sunlight, toss their lances aloft, and shout, "*Fazzia! Fazzia!*" with applause to the Giaour. He rode so now, when, having passed direct from Belgrade across the lower angle of Transylvania, and crossed the Carpathian range, he found himself fairly set towards Moldavia, with only a hundred miles or so more left between him and Jassy, which was his destination.

The Principality was in ferment; Church and civil power were in conflict and rivalry; England, France, Austria, and Russia were all disturbing themselves after the affairs of this out-of-the-way nook, conceiving that with Greece in insurrection, and Italy in a transition state, and Poland quivering afresh beneath her bonds, even Moldavia might be the match to a European conflagration, and open up the scarce-healed Eastern question; and an

English envoy was then at Jassy, charged with a special mission, to whom the despatches which Erceldoune bore carried special instructions, touching on delicate matters of moment to the affairs of central and eastern Europe, and to the part which would be played by Great Britain in the event of the freedom of the southern states, and the success of the liberal party in Athens, Hungary, or Venetia. This one bag, with the arms of England on the seal, and the all-important instructions within, was all that he carried now, slung round his neck and across his chest by an undressed belt of chamois leather. He was wholly alone; his mountain guides he had dismissed at the foot of the Carpathians, for he had gone through the most dangerous defiles and thief-invested passes all over the world, caring for no other defence than lay in his holster pistols. He had been stopped two or three times, once by the "Bail-up!" of Tasmanian bushrangers, once by a Ghoorka gang in Northern India, once by a chieftain who levied black mail in the rocky fastnesses of Macedonia,—but his shots had always cleared him a passage through, and he had ridden on with no more loss than the waste of powder and ball. He was too well known, moreover, in both hemispheres, to be molested, and the boldest hill-robbers would

have cared as little to come to close quarters with one whose strength had become proverbial, as to get themselves into trouble by tampering with the State courier of a great power.

It had been a splendid day in the young autumn, and it was just upon its close as he went through the forests, his mare, a pure-bred sorrel, scarcely touching the ground as she swept along, swift as a greyhound or a lapwing. The air was heavily scented with the fragrance of the firs; the last lingering rays of light slanted here and there across the moss through dark fanlike boughs, cone-laden; aisles of pines stretched in endless and innumerable lines of paths scarce ever trodden save by the wolf, or the wild boar, or the charcoal-burner, barely more human than the brute; and, in the rear, to the westward, towered the Carpathians, with their black rugged sides reared in the purple sunset, the guard of the Magyar fatherland.

Now and then, at rare intervals, a little hamlet buried in the recesses of the forest, whose few wretched women wore the Turkish yashmâk, spoke of Moldavia, or he came on a camp of naked wild-eyed gipseys of the country; but as evening closed in, and Erceldoune advanced into a narrow rocky defile, the nearest passage through dense pine solitudes,

even these signs of human life in its most brutalised phase, ceased wholly. There was only the rapid ring of his mare's hoofs, given back by a thousand hollow echoes, as he swept down the ravine, with high precipitous walls of rock rising on either side, while the river thundered and foamed beside him, and the trees closing above-head made it well-nigh dark as night, though beyond, the summits of the Hungarian range were still lit by the last rays of the sun gleaming golden on eternal snows. Sitting down in his saddle, with his eyes glancing, rapid and unerring as a soldier's, on either side where the shelving rocks sloped upward in the gloom, Erceldoune dashed along the defile at a pace such as the blood horses of the desert reach—the surging of the torrent at his side, the winds rising loud and stormy among the black pine-boughs above, the intense stillness and solitude around, that are only felt in the depths of a forest or the hush of a mountain-side.

These were what he loved in his life: these nights and days of loneliness, of action, of freedom, alone with all that was wildest and grandest in nature, under no law but the setting and rising of the sun, riding onward, without check or pause, a fresh horse ready saddled when the jaded one

drooped and slackened; these were what suited the passionate need of liberty, the zest to do and dare, the eagle-love of solitude ingrained in his Border-blood, and as latent in him as in the chieftains of his name when they had borne fire and sword far away into stout Northumberland, or harried the Marches in their King's defiance.

The pressure of his knees sufficing for her guidance without curb or spur, the sorrel scoured the winding ravine, fleet and sure of foot, as though the rocky and irregular ground had been a level stretch of sward, her ears pointed, her pace like the wind, all the blood and mettle there were in her roused; she knew her master in her rider. Dashing onward through the gloom thus, suddenly his hand checked her; his eyes had seen what hers had not. Thrown back on her haunches in the midst of her breathless gallop, she reared in snorting terror; any other she might have hurled senseless to the earth; he sat as motionless as though horse and man were cast together in bronze.

Across the narrow and precipitous path lay the felled trunk of a pine, blocking the way. She rose erect, and stood so for a second, her rider in his saddle firm as on a rock—a sculptor would have given ten years of his life to have caught and fixed

that magnificent attitude;—then down she came with a crash on her fore feet, while from the black barricade of the levelled pine, through the thick screen of stiffened branches, shone the gleam of half a dozen rifles, the long lean barrels glistening in the twilight.

The brigands lay in ambush waiting him; and the hoarse shout of arrest was pealed back by the echoes.

"Your papers—or we fire!"

And the steel muzzles covered him front and rear, while the challenge rang out down the vault of the hollowed rocks.

Swiftly as lightning his eyes swept over the rifles and numbered them—eight against one; rapidly as the wind he drew his pistol from his holster and fired among them; a shrill shriek pierced the air, a man reeled headlong down into the gorge of the river foaming below, and without breath, without pause, Erceldoune put the bay at the leap, trusting the rest to her hunter's blood, and facing the levelled death-dealers full in the front. The gallant beast deserved his faith; she rose point-blank at the barricade, and leapt with one mighty bound the great pine-barrier and the glittering line of steel. She landed safe;—a second, and she would

have raced onward, distancing all shot and defying all pursuit; but with a yell that rang from rock to rock, the murderous barrels she had overleapt and cleared, covered her afresh; the sharp crack of the shots echoed through the pass, three balls pierced her breast and flanks, bedding themselves where the life lay, and with a scream of piteous agony she threw her head upward, swayed to and fro an instant, and fell beneath him—dead. He sprang from the saddle ere her weight could crush him, and, with his back against the ledge of granite, turned at bay; hope he had not, succour there could be none in those dense mountain solitudes, those wastes of vast unpeopled pine-woods; in that hour he had but one thought—to sell his life dearly, and to deserve his country's trust.

The echoes of the conflict rang in quick succession on the stillness, thundered back by the reverberations of the hills, it was hot, close, mortal work in that narrow choked defile, Erceldoune, with his back against the granite, and his dead bay at his feet between him and his foes, had the strength and the fury of a legion, now that his wrath was up in all its might, and the blood-thirst wakened in him. A ball broke his right arm above the wrist; it fell useless at his side. He laughed aloud:

"Blunderers! why don't you hit through the lungs?"

And as he changed his pistol into his left hand, he raised it, and the man who had shot him fell with a crash—a bullet through his brain. He could not load again; his arm was broken, and the hoarse yell of men, infuriated to be defied, and exasperated at their comrades' loss, told him his minutes were numbered, as one cry alone grated on the night air from many voices; in Romaic, in French, in Venetian, in Hungarian;—varied tongues, but one summons alone.

"Your papers or your life! Death, or surrender!"

There was a moment's hush and pause; they waited for their menace to do their work without the bloodshed that they shirked from caution and from wisdom, rather than from humanity; and at that instant the moon, through one break in the black pine roofing above-head, poured its light through the pass. Round him in a half-circle, broken from their barricade and ambush now that his fire was spent, pressed his assassins, their faces masked by the crape drawn over them, their rifles covering him with pitiless purpose. With his right arm hanging powerless, and with the mare lying

at his feet, the sole barrier between him and the cross-fire levelled at him, stood Erceldoune, reared to his full height, motionless as though he were a statue.

"Death, or surrender!"

The summons hissed through the silence with a deadly meaning, a hoarse snarl such as the hounds give when the stag holds them too long at bay. Erceldoune stood erect, his eyes glancing calmly down on the semicircle of the long shining lines of steel, each of whose hollow tubes carried his death-warrant; a look upon his face before which the boldest, though they held his life in their hands and at their mercy, quailed; he knew how he should save his trust and his papers, though he knew that his life must pay the forfeit. He calmly watched the levelled rifles, and a half smile passed over his face;—they had brought eight against one! —it was a distinction, at least, to take so much killing.

"The devil will never give in!" swore with savage Hungarian oaths the farthest of the band. "Seize him, and bind him!—we don't want his blood."

"Take the papers, and gag him. Carl is right; we want them, not him," muttered another, in

whose southern German the keen ear of him whose life they balanced caught the foreign accent of a Gallician.

One who seemed the leader of the gang laughed —a rolling, mellow, harmonious laugh, which thrilled through the blood of Erceldoune as menace and challenge had never done: he had heard it a few nights before in the gaslit salon of the Parisian café.

"Basta, basta! 'Too many words, my masters.' Kill the Border Eagle and strip him afterwards! His beak won't peck when he's shot down!"

"Stop—stop!" muttered a milder Sicilian. "Give him his choice; we only want the despatches."

"The papers then, or we fire!"

The moon shone clearer and whiter down into the ravine, while they pressed nearer and nearer till the half-circle of steel glittered close against him, within a yard of his breast;—and the Greek who in the Café Minuit had lamented so softly the prosaic fate of the violet bonbons, pressed closest of all. He stood quietly, with no change in his attitude, and his broken wrist dripping blood on the stone at his feet; the dark scorn of fiery passions had lowered on his face, stormy, dangerous,

menacing as the wrath that lightens up a lion's eyes, while on his lips was a laugh—a laugh for the coward caution of his assassins, the womanish cruelty which compassed him with such timorous might of numbers, fearing one man unarmed and wounded!

"Death, or surrender!"

The cry echoed again, loud and hoarse now as the hounds' bay, baffled and getting furious for blood.

His back was reared against the rock; his left arm pressed against his breast, holding to him the seals that were his trust; his eyes looked down upon them steadily as he answered:

"*Fire!*"

And while his voice, calm and unfaltering, gave the word of command for his own death-volley, with a swift sudden gesture, unlooked-for and unarrested by them, he lifted his left hand, and hurled far away through the gloom, till they sank with a loud splash into the bed of the swollen rushing river, the white bag of the English despatches;—lost for ever in the deep gorge, and whirled on into darkness with the passage of foaming waters, where no spy could reach and no foe could rob them.

Then, as the ravenous yell of baffled force and infuriated passion shook the echoes of the hills, the report of the rifles rang through the night with sullen murderous peal, and Erceldoune fell as one dead.

All was still in the heart of the forest.

The snowy summits of the Carpathians gleamed white in the moonlight; the cry of the wild dog or the growl of the wild boar, the screech of the owl or the rush of the bat's wing, alone broke the silence; above the dark silent earth the skies were cloudless, and studded with countless stars, whose radiance glistened here and there through dense black shadow, on moss, and boulders, and cavernous gorges, and torrents plunging downward through the night. In the narrow channel of the defile, with gnarled pines above and waters roaring in their pent-up bed below, there lay the stiffened corpse of the mare, and across her body, bathed in her blood and in his own, with his head fallen back, and his face turned upward as the starlight fell upon it, was stretched the Queen's Messenger, where they had left him for dead.

The night had passed on and the hours stolen apace, till the stars had grown large in the heavens,

and the morning planet risen in the east before the dawn; and he had lain there, as lifeless and motionless as the sorrel beneath him, through all the watches of the night which parted the sunset of one day from the daybreak of the next. His right arm, broken and nerveless, was flung across the neck of the mare, as though, Arab-like, his last thought as he fell had been of the brute-friend whom he had lost, and who had died for him; the blood had poured from a deep chest wound, till the black velvet of his riding-coat was soaked through and through, and the mosses and the grasses were dyed with the stream that bore his life away; his face was stern yet serene, like many faces of the dead upon a battle-field, and only a deep-drawn laboured breath, that quivered at long intervals through all his frame, showed that existence had not wholly ceased with the murderous volley which had brought him to the earth, as his own shot had brought the kingly fearless strength of the golden eagle reeling downward to its fate. Either the aim of his assassins had been uncertain from the fury with which they had levelled and fired when they had seen their errand baffled, and the despatches flung beyond all reach into the mountain gorge, or they had been blinded by the flickering shadows of

the moon, and the lust of their vengeance on him, for two shots alone had touched him out of the five which had been fired at him. One ball had pierced his breast, and brought him down senseless, and, to all semblance, lifeless; it had been aimed by the leader of the band who had trifled with his ice, and mourned over the conserve of violets in Paris a few nights before. The other bullet, which had struck him in the chest, and would have cut its way straight through the lungs, had been turned aside by the solid silver of his meerschaum, in whose bowl the ball was bedded, though the force of its concussion would have stretched him insensible without a wound. He had fallen as one dead, and they had left him for such in the narrow defile, hastening themselves to leave the pine-forest far behind them, and put the range of the Carpathians between them and Moldavia, taking their own wounded with them, and plunging into the recesses of the woods, where all pursuit could be baffled, all detection defied. Whether they were mountain banditti, or masked nobles, or insurgent conspirators, those vast solitudes would never reveal, since the deed would tell no tales and bear no witness; his assassination, if ever known, would be traced, they deemed, to gipsies or charcoal-burners, while the odds were a million

to one that the fate of the English State courier would never be heard of, but would remain in the shroud of an impenetrable mystery, whilst he lay in the lonely and untrodden ravine, till the bears and the vultures left his bones to whiten unburied when they had sated their hunger on the sinewy limbs of the man who had fallen to avoid the surrender of his honour and his trust.

Darkness closes thus over the fate of many; he is "missing," and we know no more.

Nearly lifeless thus, Erceldoune had remained through the long hours where his assassins had left him; about him only the shrieking of the owls, the sough of the winds among the pines, and the distant roar of the beasts of prey, to whom his enemies had trusted for the completion and the burial of their work. Weaker men would have succumbed to less danger than he had often brooked and passed through scathless; and even now the athletic strength within him refused to perish. The flowing of the blood had stopped, a laboured sigh now and then gave sign of vitality, though not of consciousness; then, as the night was waning, a shudder ran through all his frame, and his eyes unclosed, looking upward, without light or sense, to the starlit vault above.

He remembered nothing.

The deep skies and "the stars in their courses" whirled giddily above him; the pine-boughs flickered in phantom shapes before his sight; the sounds of the winds and of the falling torrents smote dully on his ear; he had no sense but of suffocation from the congealed blood upon his chest, and the sharp agony of every breath; he wondered dimly, dreamily, who he was, and where he lay. An intense thirst parched his throat and oppressed his lungs—a thirst he suffered from without knowing what the torture could be—and the plunge and splash of the cascades in the gorge below filled his brain with vague thronging images of cool still lakes, of rushing brooks, of deep brown tarns among his native moorlands, and through them all he stood ever up to the lips in the cold delicious waters, yet ever powerless to stoop and taste one drop! The sweep of a night-bird's wing touched his forehead as it flew low under the drooped pine-branches; at the touch consciousness slowly and confusedly awoke; the night ceased to whirl round him in a chaos of shadow, the planets grew clear and familiar, and looked down on him from the dizzy mists circling above. By sheer instinct he sought to raise his right hand; it was powerless, and as he stretched out his left arm he

felt the chill, stiffened body of his lost mare, and the grasses wet with her blood and his own; then thought and recollection awoke from the mists of death, and he remembered all.

He knew that he was lying there wounded unto death, beyond all appeal for aid, all hope of succour, powerless to drive from him the frailest insect that with the morning light should begin the fell work of corruption and destruction, alone in his last hour in the desolation of the Carpathians, with no companion save the beast of prey, no watcher but the carrion kite.

Dread of death he had never known; there was no such coward weakness in him now, in his worst extremity, when he knew that he was dying, in the best years of his manhood, slaughtered by the baseness of treacherous assassination, alone in the pent defile where his murder had been planned, and where no human step would ever come, except it were that of some mountain plunderer, who would strip off the linen and the velvet that the birds of prey would have left untouched, while his bones should lie there through summer drought and winter storm unburied, unlamented, unavenged. Fear was not on him even now in his dying hour, but a mortal sense of loneliness that his life had

never known stole over him as he wakened in the hush of the forest night, paralysed, powerless, strengthless, felled in his full force, slain, like the golden eagle, by a single shot. The heavens, studded with their stars, looked chill and pitiless; the rocks towered upward in the moonlight, shutting him out from all the peopled slumbering world; no sound smote the stillness save the distant sullen moan of the brutes seeking their prey, and the winds sweeping and wailing through the endless aisles of pines;—he died in solitude.

The night wore on; a profound and awful silence reigned around, only broken by the growl of wolves or the scream of foxes from their distant haunts; the ravening cry borne on the blast of those who, with each second which passed away, might scent blood from afar off, and track it in their hunger, and come down to rend, and tear, and devour, finishing the work of slaughter. He heard that sullen bay all through the night where he lay, across the dead mare motionless; he could not have stirred a limb, though the fangs of the wild boar had been at his throat, or the wolves in a troop been upon him. Hope or thought of succour he had none; he was in the deep heart of the mountains, where none could come; and he knew too well the lore of desert

and camp not to know that all chance of life was over, that his last hour was here, and that if the vulture and the bear did not track him out, he would die of the loss of blood alone; or that if his frame bore up against the exhaustion of his wounds through the day which would soon dawn, he would perish but the more slowly, and the more agonisingly, of famine and of thirst.

Time wore on; the stars grew large as the morning drew near, and his eyes gazed upward at them where he lay in the pass of the defile; a thousand nights on southern seas, in tropic lands, in eastern aisles of palm, through phosphor-glittering waters while his ship cleft her way, through the white gleam of snow steppes while the sleigh bells chimed, through the torchlit glades of forests while the German boar or the French stag was hunted to his lair, drifted to memory as the moon shone down on him through the break in the massed pine-boughs; —for he had ever loved the mere sense and strength of life; all

> "the wild joys of living, the leaping from rock to rock,
> The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the cool river shock
> Of a plunge in a pool's living water,—the hunt of the bear,
> And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in his lair."

And he knew that this glory was dead in him for

ever, and that when those stars rose on another night, and shed their brightness upon earth and ocean, forest and sea, his eyes would be blind to their light and behold them no more, since he would be stricken out from the world of the living.

At last,—it seemed that an eternity had come and gone,—the day reached him, dawning from the splendour of Asia far away.

The light streamed in the east, the darkness of the shadows was broken by the first rays of warmth, the night birds fled to their roost, and above the clouds rose the sun, bathing the sleeping world in its golden gladness, and shining full on the snow peaks of the mountains. The forest-life awoke; the song of countless birds rose on the silence, the hum of myriad insects murmured beneath the grasses, the waters of innumerable torrents glistened in the sunbeams;—and, alone in the waking and rejoicing world, he lay, dying.

About him, where never sunlight came, were dank grasses, and the gloomy foliage of pines, but abovehead, far aloft through the walls of granite, was the blue and cloudless sky of a summer dawn. His eyes looked upward to it heavily, and with the film gathering fast over them; in his physical anguish,

in his sore extremity, there were still beauty and solace in the day.

Yet, as he gazed, the heavens were darkened, the sunlit morning became more loathsome than all the solitude and darkness of the night; wakened in the dawn and poised in air, drawn thither by the scent of blood, he saw the flocks of carrion-birds, the allies whom the assassins trusted to destroy all trace of their work, the keepers of the vigil of the dead! Cleaving the air and wheeling in the light, they gathered there, vulture and kite, raven and rock-eagle, coming with the sunrise to their carrion feast, sweeping downward into the defile with shrill and hideous clamour till they alit beside him, in their ravenous greed, upon the body of the mare, striking their beaks into her eyes and whetting their taste in her flesh, rending and lacerating, and disputing their prey.

Thus he had seen them, many a time, making their feast on the lion or camel of the East; and a sickness of loathing came upon him, and a horror unutterable;—bound in the bonds of death, and powerless to lift his arm against them, he must lie, half living and half dead, whilst the hungry hordes tore at his heart.

A cry broke from him, loud and terrible—a shout

for help, where help there could be none. Its echo pealing from the rocks, scared and scattered the ravening birds one instant from their lust; they wheeled and circled in the sunlit air, then settled once more on their spoil.

A single vulture, driven from the rest, poised above him—waiting. Looking upward, he saw the bird, with its dark wings outstretched, sailing in rings round and round in the sunlight glare, impatient and athirst, its glittering eyes fixed on him —the watcher and the harbinger of death.

By the sheer force of animal instinct, strength for the moment was restored; he sprang up to drive from off him the murderous beak that would seek his life-blood, the carrion-greed that would wrench out his eyes whilst yet they saw the day! He leapt forward, striking wildly and blindly at the black shadow of the hovering bird;—at the action the wound opened, the hemorrhage broke out afresh— he fell back senseless.

CHAPTER IV.

"N'ETES VOUS PAS DU PARADIS?"

EVEN in the silent heart of the Carpathian woods two had heard that shout of mortal extremity.

They were but a woman and a wolf-hound, resting together under the shade of the pines higher up, where the head of the torrent tumbled and splashed from rock to rock, its sheet of foam glittering in the warmth of the risen day. They heard it;—and the woman rose with a stag-like grace of terror, blent with a haughty challenge of such weakness, and the dog, with his bristling mane erect, and his head lifted in the air, woke the echoes with a deep-mouthed bay. Both listened—all was still;—then she laid her hand on the hound's shaggy coat, and gave him a single word of command. He waited, sniffing the scent borne to him on the wind, then, with his muzzle to the earth, sprang off: she followed him; the lights and shadows from the pine boughs above flung, flickering and golden, on her

uncovered hair; a woman fair as the morning, with the free imperial step of the forest deer, and the beauty of the classic and glorious south; the beauty of Aspasia of Athens, of Lucrezia of Rome.

A few short seconds, and the hound plunged down into the pass, baying loud in fear and fury, as though he tracked the trail of the crime. The birds flew up with whirling tumult from their meal, and wheeled aloft, scared and scattered; the vulture that had her talons tangled in the hair of the fallen man, and was stretching her plumed throat to deal her first aim at his sightless eyes, taking wing slowly, leaving her prey reluctantly. The woman fell on her knees beside him where he lay across the body of his slaughtered mare, as lifeless to all semblance as the animal.

She knew that she was in the presence of crime, and she believed herself in that of death; this man had been slain foully in the heart of the forest, and she was alone, in the mountain ravine that had seen the guilt done and the blow dealt, alone with one whom his enemies had left to perish and lie unburied for the hawks and crows to tear. The night had witnessed the sin and shrouded it; she and the sunny light of day had tracked and found it.

And the sickness of its guilt was on her in all its ghastliness, it all its secret craven vileness.

One thought alone seemed left her; was she too late, or could this human life, even in its last hour, be saved, be called back even though it ebbed away?

She felt for the beating of his heart; a quick shudder ran through all her frame—her hand was wet with the blood that had soaked through linen and velvet, and flowed in its deep stream from his breast. Yet she did not shrink, but pressed it there, seeking for the throbbing of the life; the pulse beat slowly, faintly still, beneath her touch—he lived even now. The carrion birds were poised on the boughs, or settled on the rocky ledges, waiting for the prey which soon or late must come to them; the hound was tearing up the moss with his muzzle to the earth; she called him to her; the dog was her friend, her guard, her slave—he came, reluctantly, looking backward at the mosses he had uprooted in his thirst for the scent they gave; she drew him to her, and signed him to look at the dying man where he was stretched across his horse; then pointed to the westward with some words in Silesian. The hound looked upward an instant with earnest, eloquent eyes, trying to read her will

—then, at his full speed, obeyed her, and went down the ravine; she had sent from her her sole defender, while, for aught she knew, the murderers of the man she sought to save might return to the scene of their outrage, and deal with her as they had dealt with him. But cowardice was scarcely more in her blood than in his to whose succour she had come with the light of the morning, and whose face was turned upward white and rigid, in mute appeal, in voiceless witness, stern, as one who has fallen in fierce contest, but calm as though he lay in the tranquillity of sleep. She gazed at him thus, till hot tears gathered in her eyes, and fell upon his forehead; he was a stranger, and not of her land; she knew not how his death had been dealt, nor in what cause he had fallen, whence he came, nor what his life had been; but his face touched to the heart all of pity there was in her, where he lay blind and unconscious in the glory of the sun, though many had said that pity was a thing unknown to her. The falling of her tears upon his brow, or the touch of her hand as it swept back the hair from his temples, and fanned his temples with a fragrant bough of pine to freshen the sultry heat of the noon-day, awoke him to some returning life; a heavy sigh heaved his chest, he stirred wearily, and his lips

moved without sound. She knew what he must need—all of comfort or of aid that she could give—and folding one of the broad dock leaves cup-shape, she filled it at the bed of the torrent, and, raising his head, held the cold water to his parched and colourless lips.

Unconsciously, instinctively, he drank and drank, slaking the intolerable thirst; she filled it three times at the channel of the river, and he drained in new existence from that green forest-cup, from that fresh and icy water, held to him by his ministering angel. Then his head sank back, lying against her, resting on her arm; his eyes had not unclosed, he was senseless still, save that he was vaguely conscious of a sense of coolness, languor, rest, and peace; and the vultures on the rocks above looked down with ravenous impatience, waiting till the watcher should weary of her vigil, and their prey be their own again.

She would not have left him now though she should have died with him. She knew the lawless brutality of the mountain hordes of gipsies and of plunderers, well enough to know that in all likelihood those who had left him for dead might return to strip him of all that was of value on his person, and would slay her, without remorse or mercy, lest

she should bear testimony to them and to their work; but to desert him and leave him to the lust of the carrion-birds and the torrid heat of the noon never passed in thought even before her—whatever fate should come of it, she had cast in her lot with his.

The sun fell through the tracery of firs upon the rushing water, the mosses red with blood, the black flock of the waiting birds, and the motionless form of Erceldoune, stretched across his slaughtered horse, his head resting, as if in the serenity of sleep, upon the bosom of the woman who had saved him, while above bent the magnificence of her face, with a golden light on its mournful splendour, and the softness of compassion in the lustre of the eyes that watched him in his unconsciousness.

Time wore on, the sun rose to noon height, the heat grew more intense, and they were still alone; he lay as in a trance still, but with that vague sense of coolness and of peace, all that he knew or sought to know; once his eyes unclosed, weary and blind, and saw, as in a vision, the face as of an angel above him. He had not strength to rouse, power to wonder, consciousness to know or ask whether he slept, or dreamed, or beheld but the phantom of his own brain; but his eyes gazed upward at the loveli-

ness that looked down on him, with the warmth of morning on it, and it pierced through the mists of death and the chaos of unconsciousness, and sank into his sight and heart, never again to be forgotten. While the sun was at its zenith and the day rolled onward, he was conscious, through all his anguish, despite all his stupor, of the fragrance of leaves that fanned his brow and stirred the heated air with soothing movement, of the gentle murmur of river-waters sounding through the stillness, and—ever when his eyes unclosed and looked upward on the radiance of the day—of the face that he saw in the luminance of the light, even as the face of a guardian angel. And he knew no more in the dulness of lulled pain, in the languor of profound exhaustion.

The loud bay of a hound broke the silence when noon had long passed, the rapid rush of the dog's feet scoured over the rocks above and down the winding path; he had known that he had been bidden to seek succour, and had left those he first met no peace till they had followed him—two Moldavian peasants, herdsmen or stable-helpers, who had understood the meaning of the hound's impatient bark and whine.

At the sound of their steps she moved from

the wounded man, and rose, with the grace which made her every action beautiful as the wild antelope's, imperial as a sovereign's in her court.

The Moldavians listened with profound reverence whilst she spoke, and without pause or question hastened to obey her command; deeds of violence were not so rare at the foot of the Carpathians, in the heart of the Principalities, as to excite either the horror or the wonder of the passive serfs; they went without a word to their work, wrenched down the long boughs of the pines, stripped them, lashed the bare poles together, and covered them with lesser branches of the firs, overstrewn in turn by the yielding velvet moss of the forest, till they had formed a rude stretcher, rough in form but fragrant and easy; then they laid him on it, lifting him with kindly gentleness. At the first movement which raised him, and the sharp agony it caused, careful and not untender though it was, he fainted; they might have taken him where they would; he knew nothing. The Moldavians prepared to raise the litter on their shoulders, then looked to her:

"Home, your Excellency?"

She started, and stood silent; then over the light

and beauty of her face swept a shadow, as of bitter memory.

"No—no!" she answered them, in their own Moldavian tongue. "Go to the convent of Monastica; it is nearer, and they will tend him better there. If any can save him, the Sisters will."

"And we are to tell them——?"

"Tell them where you found this stranger, lying as one dead, and powerless to say who are his assassins; do not give my name, or speak of me; that he is wounded, and alone, and in need, will be enough to gain him care and pity at Monastica. When you have left him in safety at the convent, come back here; you shall bury the horse, it shall not be food for vultures. Now go—each moment is precious. I shall know with what fidelity you serve him, and shall reward you as you do it well."

Yet, though she had bidden them go, she stood still, looking down on the litter where Erceldoune lay; she had saved this man's life at peril of her own, yet they would probably never meet again; she had redeemed him from amidst the dead, yet he would have no memory of her, no knowledge that she had been with him in the hour of his extremity, and rescued him from his grave. Her eyes dwelt on him in a silent farewell, and a certain tenderness

came over all her face as she bowed her head, while her lips moved with the words of a Greek prayer and benediction over the life of which she knew nothing, yet which in some sense had been made her own by every law of gratitude for a great deliverance.

Then she signed to the bearers to raise the litter and go onwards. They wound slowly with their burden up the narrow pass, and she sank down on the fallen trunk levelled by his assassins for their barricade, her rich dress sweeping the blood-stained mosses, her head resting on her hands that were twisted in the lustrous masses of her hair; her eyes, with their mournful brilliance, their luminance fathomless as that of tropic skies by night, gazing into the depths of the torrent foaming below in its black bed; and at her side the Silesian hound, his mane erect, his head uplifted, his feet pawing the turf, as though he scented the blood-trail, and panted for command to hunt the evil-doers to their lair.

A small antique chamber, with grey walls and snow-white draperies; an ebony crucifix with a marble Christ hanging above an altar draped with velvet, and broidered with gold, and fragrant with lilies in silver cups; a painted Gothic window

through which were seen stretches of green pine-woods and golden haze beyond: and an intense stillness through which pealed, softly and subdued, the chant of the *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi;* these were what Erceldoune opened his eyes upon, and saw, and heard, when he awoke from a long trance that had been death itself for aught he knew, and through which he had only been conscious of burning torture, of intolerable pain, of mellow strains of music floating through his brain, and of one face of divinest beauty bent above him whilst he lay bound in bonds of iron, in swathes of fire. For he had been delirious for many days in the Convent of Monastica.

His life had hung on a thread; the ball was in his breast, and the fever of his wounds, combined with the weakness consequent on loss of blood, had kept him in sharpest peril through all the rest of that sultry autumn. But the bullet had missed his lungs, and the intense vitality and resistance in him brought him through all which would have slain at a blow a weaklier and less hardily trained frame. The skill in leechcraft of the Sisters of Monastica was proverbial in the Principalities; women who loved him could not have tended him more tenderly and unweariedly than did those high-born recluses

who had sought the solitudes of the dense Moldavian pine-forests, in a conventual community different to those of any other country. He was saved, and awoke one sunlit evening, conscious and calm, gazing dreamily and wonderingly at the dead Christ on the altar, and the narrow arched window, with its glimpse of plain and forest through the slit, while the *Agnus Dei* pealed on the stillness of the chamber. He thought himself dreaming still.

To his bedside came a nun, pale, gentle, with dove-like eyes, a woman no longer young. Erceldoune looked at her dimly; the past was a blank, yet unfamiliar as the chamber was to him, and unreal his own personality, he vaguely desired and missed what he had seen throughout his delirium—what he did not behold on awakening. And the first words he spoke were:

"Where is *she?*"

The Sister shook her head, looking on him with a compassionate welcoming smile.

"I cannot understand, my son. I can speak a little French, but you must not talk yet, you are too weak."

All European languages, most of the Eastern, had been as familiar to him as his own. He repeated his question impatiently in the nun's tongue:

"Where is she?"

"Who, my son?"

"Who? A woman—or an angel—who has been with me always."

"None have been with you, my son, save myself and those of my Order."

He made a faint intolerant sign of dissent; and his eyes wandered over the place where he lay, in weary search, missing in consciousness and in reality the face which had been ever before him in delirium.

"Where am I, then?"

"In our convent at Monastica. You were found all but lifeless in the forest by two peasants, who brought you hither. You have been in sore peril, my son, but, by the blessing of the most holy Mother of God, we have wrought your cure. But keep silence, and rest now, you are very weak."

"Weak?—*I?*"

He repeated the word in marvelling incredulity; he who had stood face to face with the lion in the sultry African night, and measured his strength with the desert king's, and prevailed,—he who from his childish years upward, through a long, and daring, and adventurous life, had never known his force to fail, his power to desert him,—was unable to

realise that he could be laid low and powerless as any reed levelled by the wind! Instinctively he lifted his right arm to raise himself—that right arm which had never failed him yet in battle, in storm, in the death-grapple, or in any blow dealt in love of justice, in hatred of dishonour—it fell nerveless and broken. *Then* he realised that his strength was gone; and for the sole time in his life, Erceldoune could have turned his face to the wall and wept like a woman.

"I remember," he said, faintly. "I remember now. The cowards shot me down, and she saved me. Tell them I destroyed 'the papers;' but——"

The words died away unintelligible to the nun, his head fell back, and his eyes closed; he felt how utter was his weakness. He lay exhausted, his thoughts wandering over all that past of peril which had long been a blank to him, and which now slowly and by degrees returned to memory, striving to realise what manner of thing this could be, this calamity of stricken strength which his life had never before dreaded or conceived. Sweeping like fire through his blood, and filling his frame as with fresh life, there came with consciousness recollection of the murderous gang who had stretched him there, and fierce, natural thirst for vengeance on his

cowardly foes, for the hour of reckoning when he should rise and deal with that craven womanish brute, whose gentle mellow laugh had bidden them "kill the Border Eagle," and whose shot had brought him to the earth.

A fair and open antagonist Erceldoune would honour, and forgive frankly and generously from his heart; but to the coward treachery that struck him in the dark, he swore that death itself should not be more pitiless or more inexorable than his wrath.

The shadows lengthened through the painted window, the music ceased from the convent chapel, the nun left him, and knelt before the altar lost in prayer; it was intensely still, no sound was upon the air save that from the distance the bells of one of the Moldavian monasteries were chiming the vespers—it was a pause as strange in his strong, rapid, varied, richly-coloured life of action and adventure as that which we feel when we enter the shaded silent aisles of some cathedral, and the doors close behind us, shutting out all the accustomed crowds, the busy whirl, and the swift press, and the hot sunlight of the city we have left without. He had never known in all the years of his existence that profound exhaustion, that death-like

prostration, in which all vitality seems suspended, and in which a lulled, dreamy, listless meditation is all of which we are left capable; he knew them now as he lay gazing at the altar, with its dead Christ and its white river-lilies, and the bowed form of the kneeling nun, while all sense of pain, of weakness, of thirst for the just vengeance he would rise and reach drifted from him, merged and lost in one memory. A memory luminous, angel-like, as are the imaginations which fill the mind of painters with shapes divine and visions of beauty, but such as had never entered the life or the thoughts of this man till now, when, in the sunset stillness of the lonely oratory at Monastica he saw ever before him, with the depths of an unspeakable compassion in her fathomless eyes, the face of the woman who had saved him.

Where was she?

He questioned ceaselessly for many days each of the Order who came to his bedside and tended him with skilled care, and brought him fruits and sherbet, and prayed for him at the altar, where the lilies were placed fresh with every dawn, and the dead God looked down with serene and mournful smile. He insisted that a woman had come to him in the defile when he lay there dying, and had given him

water, and had saved him. They thought his persistence the remembrance of some delirious hallucination, some dream which haunted him, and which he could not sever from reality. He saw the Moldavian serfs, who came each day during his danger to the convent for news of him; and, whilst he rewarded them, interrogated them as to how and where they had discovered him. They answered that a dog had led them to where he lay, and that they had seen that he was all but lifeless, and had made a litter of pine-boughs and brought him to the gates of Monastica for succour. When he pressed them, and insisted that a woman had been the first to rescue him, the Moldavians shook their heads; *they* had found him, and had brought him hither. They had barely more intelligence than that of a kindly good-humoured animal, and adhered doggedly to their statement; it was useless to question them; Erceldoune bade them be given half the gold pieces in his travelling-belt, and let them go. It was not his nature to pursue uselessly, nor to give expression to a futile annoyance or an unavailing disappointment; he was silent from that moment on the subject.

The nuns, with their Mother Superior, thought he had become convinced that his fancy was the

phantom of his delirium, Erceldoune remained certain that no unreality, no mere vision fever begotten, would have been impressed as this was upon him; he remembered what it would have been wholly unlike him to have imagined. And this fugitive memory of one who had been his saviour in his extremity, yet who was lost to him on his awakening to consciousness, filled his thoughts unceasingly during the lull of his life in the solitudes of Monastica.

For many weeks he lay there in the antique quiet chamber, with the glimpse of hill and torrent seen through its single casement, and the cadence of the *Angelus* or the *Pro Peccatis* alone breaking the stillness at matins, mass, or vespers; the inaction, the imprisonment, the monotony, were as intolerable to him as to a fettered lion, for though solitude might be oftentimes his preference, it was ever the solitude of freedom, of action, and of the grandeur of desert wilds. He recovered slowly but surely, the science of the sisters and his own natural strength bringing him through in the teeth of imminent peril; but it was far into the autumn, and the pines were the only trees not bare in the Moldavian woods, when he rose with anything of his old power in his limbs, with anything of the old muscular

force in his right arm, and breathed without pain, and was free to go back to the world of the living without danger.

Meanwhile, Europe rang for a space with his attempted assassination. A Queen's Messenger could not have been left for murdered, and English state papers of the first and most secret importance been waylaid by so singular and trained a conspiracy, without the outrage being of import, and rousing alike the wrath of his government and the speculations of all other Powers. That those who had stopped him were no ordinary assassins and marauders the object of their plunder showed; common banditti would have menaced his money, not his despatches. It seemed evident that his enemies had been men of considerable resources and power, that they had been well acquainted with his movements, and that their object had been political. Southern Europe was in the throes of revolt, and much of central and eastern Europe seething in intrigue; political gamesters would have counted one man's assassination a very little cost for the gain of political information and advantage in their unscrupulous rouge et noir.

Amidst all, the criminals remained untracked. Moldavia said she did all she could to discover and

render them up to justice. Whether or not this were true, they were undiscovered; the little State was heavily mulcted for the outrage, and the perpetrators went scot free at large, the night and their masks having shrouded them, the pine-forests telling no tales, and the sole clue to their subsequent identification lying in Erceldoune's recognition by voice of their ringleader, as the vivacious and graceful bewailer for the sacrifice of crystallised violets, whom he had met at the Paris café.

The menace of England failed to track his assassins and bring them to their reckoning; but he swore that sooner or later his own vengeance should find them, and strike home to that tiger brute whose laugh he would know again though a score of years should have rolled away before they stood face to face.

"You bear no malice to your savage murderers, my son?" said the Abbess of Monastica to him, wistfully, one day, an aged woman, white-haired and venerable, gentle as a child, and unworldly as an infant, for she had taken the veil in her fourteenth year, and had never left the convent now that she had reached her seventieth, save on an occasional visit, as permitted by Moldavian rules, to the innocent festivities of Jassy.

"Malice, madam? No! I am not a woman!"

The Abbess looked at him wistfully still; the answer was affirmative, yet she was not wholly secure that this was the meek and lowly mercy which she sought to win from him.

"Then you forgive them, my son, and would remember, if you met them, the Lamb of God's injunction, 'If thy enemy smite thee on one cheek, give him the other,' and would refrain from all vengeance—would you not?"

Erceldoune's hand came down on the massive oak table standing by him with a force that shook it to its centre.

"By my honour, madam, I would remember it so, that the life should not be left in one of them! Forgive? Ay! when I have turned dastard like them."

The Mother Superior gazed at him with perplexed trouble in her eyes; the childlike innocent woman could not understand the strong unfettered nature of the man, with its deep passions and its fiery honour, which made the low serpent meanness of malice as impossible and incomprehensible to him as it made the chastisement of cowardice and the vengeance of treachery instinctive and impera-

tive, resistless as an impulse as it was sacred as a duty.

"But forgiveness is God-like, my son."

"May-be, madam; but I am mortal."

"But it is a human duty."

"To an open, gallant foe, madam—yes! I will render it him to-morrow, and honour him from my soul the better he fights me and the harder he strikes; but the serpent that stings me in the dark I set my heel on, for the vermin he is, and serve God and man when I strangle him!"

The venerable Abbess sighed; she had ministered to him through his unconsciousness and through his suffering, she had seen him bear torture with a silent endurance that seemed to her superhuman in its heroism, and she had wept over the stately stature, levelled like a cedar felled by the axe, and the superb strength brought down to worse than a child's weakness, till she had felt for him something of a mother's tenderness, and found it hard to urge him to love and to pardon his injurers. Moreover, Mother Veronica was no casuist.

"It must be bitter, my son, I know," she murmured, "and the evil spirit is strong in us, and fearful to subdue; but one who suffered a deadlier

wrong than thine forgave the traitor and the murderer, though Judas sold him to the Cross."

Erceldoune gave a movement of impatience, and the muscles of his arm straightened as though by sheer instinct of longing to "deliver from the shoulder."

"Pardon me, holy mother, I am no theologian! But I know this, that if there had been a touch of loyalty and fealty among the eleven left, that scoundrel of Iscariot would not have lived till the morrow to hang himself. If I had been in Galilee, he would have had a lunge of steel through his lungs, and died a traitor's death!"

So startling a view of apostolic duty had never penetrated the sacred walls of the convent of Monastica; the whole range of her instruction from the Church had never given her a rule by which to deal with such a novel article of creed, and she sat silent, gazing at him with a wistful bewilderment, wondering what the sainted Remigius had replied when King Clovis gave him a similar answer in the old days of Gaul.

Erceldoune, who felt a sincere gratitude to the aged woman who had showed him a mother's tenderness and care throughout a lengthened peril,

bent to her with gentle reverence, which sat well upon him.

"Pardon me, madam, I spoke something roughly, and men should not talk of these matters to women. There is one broad ground on which we can meet and understand one another, that of your goodness to a stranger, and his sincere recognition of it. Let that suffice!"

And Mother Veronica smiled wistfully on him, and after seventy years of unsullied devotion to the Supreme Church, found herself guilty of the horrible heresy of loving one whose soul was lost, and whose wild living will, and erring, wayward creeds, were the most fatal forms of tumult and revolt against which the Infallible Faith warned her!

An eagle from his native Cheviot-side fettered in a cage, would not have been less fitted for it than Erceldoune for his imprisonment at Monastica; as soon as he was strong enough to be raised in his couch, and was able to use his arm, he beguiled the time with a pastime which had often whiled away hours and days of enforced inaction, in quarantine, on board ship, becalmed in the tropics, or cooped up in Marseilles during the mistral. He painted extremely well. He was too thorough a man of

action, too truly the English Effendi of the Eastern nations, ever to take art or indolence by choice; but there had come many times in his life when to paint the rare scenery, or the picturesque groupings around him, had been his only available pursuit; and he did this with singular dash and delicacy, vividness and truth. Erceldoune would never have been a creative artist; he had not the imaginative or poetic faculty which idealises, it was wholly alien to his nature and his habits; but what he *saw* he rendered with a force, a fidelity, and a brilliance of hue which painters by the score had envied him. He passed the dreary weeks now at Monastica painting what he had seen; and the picture grew into such life and loveliness that the nuns marvelled when they looked on it, as the Religieuses of Bruges marvelled when they saw the "Marriage of St. Katherine" left in legacy to them by the soldier-artist Hans Hemling, whose wounds they had dressed, and cried out that it should be the Virginal altar-piece in a world-famed cathedral. Yet the picture was but a woman's face—a face with thoughtful lustrous eyes, and hair with a golden reflex on it, and lips which wore a smile that had something more profound than sadness, and more imperial than tenderness; a face looking downward

from an aureole of light, half sunlit and half shadowed.

"Now I know that I have seen it, or I could not have painted it," said Erceldoune to himself, as he cast down his brushes; and to know that, was why he had done so.

"Keep the picture, madam, as altar-piece, or what it please you, in token of my gratitude at the least for the kindness I cannot hope to return," he said to the Mother Superior; "and, if you ever see a woman whose likeness you recognise in it, she will be the one to whom I first owed the rescue of my life. Tell her Fulke Erceldoune waits to pay his debt."

And Mother Veronica heard him with as much pain in his last words as she had had pleasure in his first, for she saw that the phantom of his delirium was still strong on him, and feared that his mind must wander, to be so haunted by this mere hallucination of the lady of his dreams.

A few days later on, Erceldoune, able at last to endure the return journey through the mountains and across Hungary, attended a Te Deum to gratify the Abbess, in celebration and thanksgiving for his own restoration from death to life; left his three months' pay to the almsgiving of the Order; bowed

his lofty head for the tearful benediction of the Mother Superior; and quitted the innocent community of religious women, in whose convent he had found asylum; the *Angelus* chiming him a soft and solemn farewell, as, in the late leafless autumn, while the black Danube was swelling with the first rains of winter, and the forests were strewn with the yellow leaves that covered the grave of his dead sorrel, he went out from the solitudes of Monastica back to the living world.

CHAPTER V.

"AN IGNIS FATUUS GLEAM OF LOVE."

"It was a superb thing—magnificent!"

The most popular personage in the English Cabinet was standing on the hearth-rug of his own library of his wife's château of Liramar, South Italy, where he had snatched a brief autumn holiday, nothing altered and little aged since some twenty years before when the beggared Border-lord, in the pride and liberty of his youth and his ruin, had won the great Minister's liking for life, by—a defiance.

Erceldoune laughed, a little impatiently.

"Nothing of the kind! Any other man in the service would have done the same; simplest duty possible."

"Simple duties get done in this world, do they? Humph! I didn't know it. I suppose you expected, when you gave the word to fire, that the brutes would kill you—eh?"

"Of course! I can't think now how they missed

it. I ought to have been riddled with bullets, if they had aimed properly."

"I believe he's half disgusted he wasn't wholly dead, now!" said his lordship, plaintively. "It was a superb thing, I tell you; but don't you do it again, Erceldoune. The trash we write, to bully and blind one another, isn't worth the loss of a gallant man's life. *We* know that! A terrible fellow went and said so too, in the Commons, last session; he was up, and nobody could stop him. He told us, point blank to our faces, that though we *posed* very successfully for the innocent public, we might as well drop the toga and show the sock and buskin before each other, as the attitudinising didn't take in the initiated, and must be a fearful bore always for us! Clever fellow. Tremendous hard hitter; but he wants training. By-the-way, the Principalities paid us down a heavy fine as indemnity for that outrage; half the money comes to you, clearly."

"I thank you, my dear lord, I have no need of it."

"Eh? What? I thought you were poor, Erceldoune?"

"I am; but I have never been in debt, and I want nothing. Besides, if you will pardon my saying so,

I don't admire that system of 'indemnification,'" pursued Erceldoune, giving himself a shake like a staghound where he leaned against the marble mantlepiece. "A single scoundrel, or a gang of scoundrels, commits an insult, as in this case, on England, or any other great power, through the person of her representative, or perhaps merely through the person of one of her nation; the state to which the rascals belong is heavily mulcted, by way of penalty. Who suffers? Not the guilty, but the unhappy multitudes, peasants, traders, farmers, citizens, gentlemen—all innocent—who pay the taxes and the imposts! With an outrage from a great Power, if accidentally committed on a traveller by a horde of thieves, you would take no notice whatever; if one were obviously done as a political insult, you would declare war. But when the thing happens in a small state, she is punished by an enormous fine, which half ruins her, for a crime which she could no more prevent than you can help in Downing-street the last wreckers' murder that took place in Cornwall. Pardon me, but I fail to see the justice or the dignity of the system; and for myself, when my own conviction is that the assassins who stopped me were not Moldavians at all, what compensation would it be to me to have the money

wrung from a million or two guiltless people, whose country the cowards chose to select as their field? If you wish to avenge me, track the dastards, and give *them* into my power."

The statesman listened as they stood alone in the library, and looked at his guest, with humour lighting up his blue eyes.

"Erceldoune, if you hadn't that stiff-necked Scottish pride, which would make you knock me down, in all probability, if I offered it, I would give you three thousand a-year to live with me and speak your mind," laughed his lordship, meaning his words too. "You are a miracle in your generation; you're not a bit like this age, sir; not a whit more than the Napiers; you speak rarely, and never speak but the truth; you have to choose between your life and your trust, and, as a matter of course, give up your life; you are moneyless, and refuse money the state would tender you, because you think it gained 'neither by justice nor dignity;' you have dined at my house in town, you have stayed in my house in the country; you know that I like you, and yet you are the only man of my acquaintance who has never asked me for anything! On my life, sir, you don't do for this century."

"Unfit for my century, my lord, because I value

your friendship, and honour your esteem too highly to regard both only as ladders to 'place?'"

The minister stretched his hand out to him with one of those warm silent gestures of acknowledgment, very uncommon with him, but very eloquent. Too sweet and sunny a temper to be a "good hater," he was a cordial friend; how true and steadfast a friend those only knew who knew him in private life.

"Well, the State at least owes you something," he said, after a pause. "You must let us pay our debt. Messengerships never do lead to anything, but that is no reason why they should not in your person. There are many half civil half military appointments for which your life has fitted you, and which you yourself would fill better than any man I know; the governorship of some good island, for instance."

Erceldoune was silent a moment, leaning against the marble.

"I thank you sincerely, but I want nothing, and I have too much of the nomad in me to care to relinquish my wandering life in saddle. Give me no credit for asceticism, or renunciation; it is nothing of the kind. I should have been born a desert chief; I have never been happier than in the

Kabyles' 'houses of hair,' living on couscoussou and camel-flesh, and waiting for the lions through the night with the Zouaves and the Arabs. If you think, however, that I have really done enough to have earned any preference from England, I will ask you to send me on service, as soon as I am myself again, to South and East Europe, with your authorisation to take leisure in returning if I desire it, and full powers from the government to go to any expenses, or impress any assistance I require, if I should be able to discover the persons, or the track of the assassins."

"Certainly, you shall have both to the fullest extent. You shall have the authorisation of the Crown to act precisely as you see fit; and spare no cost, if you can get on the villains' trail, in bringing them to justice. I fear you will be baffled: we don't know enough to identify them; they seconded us well in France, and everything was tried, but failed. It was in Paris you had seen the man whose voice you recognised, wasn't it? Would you know him again?"

Erceldoune ground his heel into the tiger-skin of the hearth-rug as though his tiger-foe were under his feet: he longed to have his hand on the throat of the silky murderous brute.

"I would swear to his voice and his laugh anywhere a score of years hence; and I should know him, again, too: he was as beautiful as a woman, though I did not take his measure as I should have done had I guessed where we should meet."

"The object, of course, was purely political, and there are thousands of men—Carlists, Ultramontanists, Carbonarists, Reactionists, Socialists, and all the rest of the Continentalists—who would have held that they only obeyed their chiefs, and acted like patriots in shooting you down, for the sake of your papers. Well, you shall have your own way, Erceldoune, and all you ask—it is little enough! Lady George!" broke off his lordship, vivaciously, as a party from the billiard-room entered the library, "here is Erceldoune so enamoured of the country he was murdered in, that he is asking me to have him sent off there again! These Messenger fellows are never quiet: he says he ought to be an Arab chief, and so he should be."

"He only wants the white haick to look like one," smiled Lady George, a lovely blonde, dropping her azure eyes on him with an effective side glance—wholly wasted.

Erceldoune, to his own infinite annoyance, had found himself an object of hero-worship to all the

brilliant beauties down at Liramar, where he had been bidden by the great Minister as soon as he was able to leave Monastica, and where that unworn octogenarian was himself taking a rare short rest in the November of the year. His lordship was imperative in his summons to his favourite courier, to whom the southern air was likely to give back the lost strength which was still only returning slowly and wearily to muscles and limbs whose force had been "even as the lions of Libya."

The story of his single-handed peril, his choice of death rather than disloyalty to his trust, in the silent ravine of the Moldavian pine-woods, had sent a thrill of its own chivalry through the languid, *nil admirari*, egotistic, listless pulses of high-bred society. Erceldoune was the hero of the hour if he chose; and the Border Eagle might have folded his strong pinions under the soft caress of a thousand white hands. But he did not choose: he had never cared for women—they had never gained any hold on him. Steeped in vice in his earliest years, sensuality had little power over his manhood; and the languid intrigues, the hollow homage, the "love" of the drawing-rooms—pulseless, insipid, artificial, frivolous, *paré à la mode*—were still more contemptible, and absolutely impossible to him. Nor was

fashionable life to his taste: its wheels within wheels ill suited the singleness of his own character; the feverish puerility of its envies and ambitions woke no chord of sympathy in him; and its hot-pressed atmosphere was too narrow, and too rarefied with heat and perfume, for the lungs which only breathed freely on the moorland and the prairie, on the ocean and the mountain-side. A man once bound to the great world is a slave till the day of his death, and Erceldoune could not have lived in chains.

"You are very like one of the eagles of your own Border, Sir Fulke," said a French Duchesse at Liramar to him. She had been a beauty, and now, at forty, was a power—the customary development of a Frenchwoman.

"In love of liberty, madame, and solitude? Well, yes."

He thought how he and the golden eagle had fallen, much alike, and the thought crossed him vaguely, should he ever live to wish that the shot, like the eagle's, had told home?

"Yes, and if I were twenty years younger, I would tame you!" said the Duchesse, with a malicious smile. Ah! how you would suffer, how you would beat your strong wings against the chains,

how you would hate and worship, in one breath, your captor, and how you would pant out your great life in torture till you sank down at last in slavery as intense as your resistance!"

"*I!* You do not know me much, Miladi."

The Duchesse gave him a perfumy touch with her fan as she swept away.

"Bah! M. Erceldoune, I know your tribe and I know their tamers. You will find a worse foe than a bullet, soon or late. Your assassins were merciful to what your love will be—*when* you love. See if I am wrong!"

And with a laugh of compassion and of mocking prescience the prophetess of dark omen went to her whist-table, where she played as well as Prince Metternich; and Erceldoune passed on his way to the smoking-room, a contemptuous disdain working in him;—"love!" he had never known it, he had never believed in it, the frank boldness of his nature had been proof against most of its seductions, and he only recognised in it a sophistical synonym for women's vanity and men's sensuality, or *vice versâ;* and, take it in the long run, he was undoubtedly right.

His passions were great; but they had never been fairly aroused; and he had, or thought he had, them under an iron bridle, like some Knight of St. John,

half priest, half soldier, stern warrior and ascetic monk in one, his soul, like his body, mailed in steel, and wrestling with the vile tempters of the flesh, as with twining serpents that sought to wreathe round and stifle out his martial strength, and drag it downwards into voluptuous fumes, and enervating shame, and weakness, that would disgrace his manhood and his pride, his order and his oath.

Yet vague, dreamy, half soft, half stormy thoughts swept over him of some love that this world might hold, with all the delight of passion, whilst loftier, richer, holier, than mere passion alone, which wakes and desires, pursues, possesses, — and dies. He believed it a fable; he was incredulous of its dominion; it was, he fancied, alien to his nature; he neither needed nor accredited it; yet the dim glory of some such light that "never yet was upon sea or land," half touched his life in fancy for a second. For, where he sat in the lonely smoking-room, with the smoke curling up from the meerschaum bowl which had turned the bullet from his heart in Moldavia, and floating away to the far recesses of Rembrandtesque shade,—out from the shadow there seemed to rise, with the lustre in the eyes and the unspoken tenderness upon the lips, the face of the one who had saved him.

The face of a temptress or an angel?

Erceldoune did not ask, as he sat and dreamt of that memory called up from the depths of thought and shade; then he rose with an impatient disdain of himself, and strode out into the white, warm, Mediterranean night.

Had he refused to surrender his life to any living woman, only to have it haunted by a mere phantom-shape, a hallucination wrought from the fever-fancies of a past delirium?

The great Minister went home; the gathering at Liramar remained with the hostess—Erceldoune with them; the sea breezes were bringing him back, their old force into his limbs, and the mellow air was driving away the danger which for a time had threatened his lungs from the deep chest-wound where the ball had lodged. In physics he did not believe—he never touched them; air and sea-water were his sole physicians, and under them the fallen Titan rose again.

"I took too much killing!" he laughed to one of the men as they drifted down the waters lapping the sunny Sicilian shores, in the brief space which severs the day from the night. He had reported himself ready for fresh service, and the Messenger who was to bring the Italian bag to Palermo would

deliver him despatches for the Principalities and Asiatic Turkey. Erceldoune was impatient to be on the move, and feel himself in saddle once more; while in inaction, too, he was no nearer on his quest —of those who had attacked his life, and of the one who had saved it. Phantom, hallucination, delirious memory, be it what it would, the remembrance which haunted him, and which he had no single proof was anything more tangible than a fever-born fancy, was strong on him—the stronger the more he thrust it away. The woman who had rescued him, and who had since been lost to him in the darkness of mystery and the wide wilderness of the world, he could not recall, save by such intangible unsubstantiated recollection as had remained to him from unconsciousness; common reason told him that it could be but a folly which haunted the brain from the visions of his long peril, but reason failed to drive it out, or shake the first impression which had ever wakened or seized his imagination. The idea which pursued him, the face he had painted in the monastic solitude of the convent, had become to him a living reality; he resisted it, he trampled it out; not unfrequently he reçoiled and shuddered from it, as from the phantasia of impending insanity: but it remained there. Her face rose before him from the

sea depths, when he plunged down into the dark violet waves, and let them close above his head; he saw it with every gorgeous sunset that flushed the skies with fire; he remembered it with every hour he spent alone lying on the sands, or steering through the waters, or waiting with his rifle for the sea-birds on the pine-crowned rocks. He could not banish it; and he used no sophism or half-truths with himself; he knew that, vision or reality, whichever it was, it had dominion over him, and that the search he so thirsted to make for his assassins was not more closely woven with his thoughts than the quest of what was but " un ombre, un rêve, un rien"—a phantom and a shadow.

The boat dropped down the Mediterranean that night, while the sun was setting, drifting gently through the blue stretch of the waves, while the striped sails were filled by a west wind that brought over the sea a thousand odours from the far Levant, and the voices of the women idly chaunted the "Ave Maria, Stella Virgine!" Erceldoune was stretched in the bottom of the boat, at the feet of a fair aristocrat, who leaned her hand over the leeward side playing with the water, and letting the drops fall, diamond bright as her rings, glancing at him now and then the while, and wondering, as she

had wondered long at Liramar, what manner of man this was, who confessed himself poor and a mere courier, yet bore himself like a noble; who had the blood of an ancient race, and the habits of a desert chief; who was indifferent and insensible to all women, yet had, for all, a grave and gentle courtesy, for the grape-girl among the vineyards yonder, as for her, the patrician and the queen of coquettes, leaning here. He was unlike anything in *her* world —and Lady George would fain have roused in him the forbidden love which she, proud empress though she was, had learned, in her own despite, as her own chastisement.

But Erceldoune lay looking eastward at a lateen-boat cutting its swift track through the waters; so little had her beauty ever caught his eyes, that he never even knew that he had roused her interest. Vanity he had absolutely none; and as for pride in such uncared-for, unsought victories, he would have as soon thought of being proud that a bright Sicilian butterfly had flown beneath his foot, and been crushed by it.

"How beautifully she cuts her way!" he said to the man beside him. "Look how she dips, and lifts herself again—light as a bird! She will be past us like lightning."

Lady George glanced at her rival across the sea; how strange it was, she thought, that any man should live who could look at a lateen-boat rather than at her!

"As with a bound
Into the rosy and golden half
Of the sky,

I suppose," she quoted listlessly.

Their own vessel floated lazily and slowly; the lateen-craft came on after them, as he had said, turned into a pleasure-boat, and draped with costliness, and laden with a fragrant load of violets gathered for distilling, piled high, and filling the air with odour. The skiff passed them swiftly;—half-screened by the rich draperies, the tawny sails, and the purple mound of the violets, and turned half from them, and towards the western skies, as the boat flashed past in the haze of light, he saw a woman.

With a loud cry he sprang to his feet, the vessel rocking and lurching under the sudden impetus;—he had seen the face of his dreams, the face of his saviour. And the lateen-boat was cutting its swift way through the waves, away into the misty purple shadow out of reach, out of sight!

"Neuralgia?" said one of the men. "Ah! that is always the worst of shot-wounds."

"You are ill?—you are in pain?" asked Lady George; and her voice was hurried and tremulous.

Erceldoune set his teeth hard, his eyes straining into the warm haze where the lateen-boat was winging her rapid way, out of reach, while their own lay idly rocking on the waves.

"Pardon me—no," he said, in answer to them, for the man's nature was too integrally true to seek shelter under even a tacit acceptance of an untruth. "I saw one whom I recognised as having last seen in Moldavia the day the brigands shot me down. I fear that I foolishly startled you all?"

They thought it nothing strange that any link with the memory of his attempted assassination should have roused him; and he leaned over the boat's side following the now distant track of the light lateen-skiff with his eyes,—silent in the wild reasonless joy, and the bitter baffled regret, which swept together through his veins. The face that he had dreamed had bent over him in his anguish and extremity, was then a truth, a living loveliness, a life to be found on earth—no fever-born ideal of his own disordered brain; he had seen again, and seen now in the clearness of reason, the face of the woman who had been his ministering angel. Yet, as she had been lost to him then, so she was lost to him

now; and as the sun sunk down below the waves, and the sudden southern night fell shrouding the Sicilian boat in its shadows, the phosphor light left in its track and the odour of its violet freight dying off from the sea and the air, he could have believed he had but been dreaming afresh.

Was he mad? Erceldoune almost asked himself the question as he leaned over the vessel's side looking down into the purple shadows of the water. High-born, by the beauty of her face, and by the luxury with which that little skiff was decked, how should she have been in the wild solitudes of the Moldavian forest? Compassionate to his peril and extremity, would she have cared nothing to know whether death or life had been at last his portion? —and could an act of such noble and pitying humanity have needed the veil of mystery and denial in which it had been shrouded by the serfs' repudiation of all knowledge that any save themselves had found him?

Yet, the face of which he had dreamed, he had seen now in the evening light of the Mediterranean —the mere phantom of a delirium could not have become vivid and living thus. A heavy oath was stifled in his teeth, as he stood with his eyes strained to pierce the cloudy offing. Why had he not been

alone, that—a few yards more sail flung out to the winds, and his own hand upon the helm—his boat could have given chase down the luminous sea, and have swept away with hers, no matter at what cost of sand-reef or of shipwreck, into that golden mist, that twilight darkness!

CHAPTER VI.

THE WISDOM OF MOTHER VERONICA.

The pines were tipped with their lightest green, the torrents were swollen with the winter rains, the rafts were rushing, lightning-like, down the rivers in the impetus that the spring lends to nature and to labour, to the earth and the human swarm it bears; primroses strewed every inch of ground under the boughs of the pine-woods; and the light of the young year was on the solitary hills and ravines as Erceldoune rode once more into Moldavia, through the same defile where his assassins had waylaid him.

He checked his horse, and wondered if the horrors of that wild night had been all a dream, as he looked down: the tumbling water glistened in the sunlight, the grass had grown in ranker luxuriance where the good bay was laid in her last resting-place; over the place where he had fallen, bright clusters of spring-flowers blossomed among

the moss; two records of the night's work alone remained: the black and broken pine-trunk that had been flung across the road, and had only been now lifted to one side, and a dark crimsoned stain, where the granite rock had been soaked and crusted with his life-blood, too deeply for even the snows of winter wholly to wash out the shade it left. The most thoughtless man would have felt some shadow of earnestness steal on him in such a place, with such a memory; Erceldoune, though used to meet death in every shape, and too habituated to danger to ever feel its terror, let the bridle slacken on his stallion's neck, and gazed down on the wild ravine round him, with something of solemnity upon him —had the shot been one hair's breadth nearer his heart, he had now been rotting there with his dead horse; had she who had come as his guardian angel been one instant later, his eyes had now been blind to the light of the sun, and his life numbered with the vast nameless multitudes of the grave.

It was a strange unreal knowledge to the man in whose veins life swept with such eager vivid force, and in whose every breath and every limb strength was so vital, that life and strength both seemed eternal.

It was very still, here in the depths of the Danu-

bian defile; and in the flood of sunset light he seemed to see the face of the woman he had lost. His heart went out to her with a futile, passionate longing; the pine-boughs that bent over him had shadowed her, the water that foamed at his feet had been touched by her hand; here his head had rested on her bosom, here his eyes had looked upward through the mists of agony to hers. The very grasses whispered of her; the very rocks were witness of his debt to her!

In madness with himself, in passionate thought of her, he dashed the spurs into his horse's flanks, and swept, full gallop, down the steep incline. Was *this* Love?

For a woman seen but twice, for a mere memory, for a loveliness, fugitive, nameless, dreamlike, mourned and lost!

In the first spring-time of the year, Holy Mother Veronica sat in her pleasant little chamber, which was panelled with maple wood, and filled with early flowers, and delicate carvings, and the soft-hued heads of saints, and had as little of conventual gloom as though it had been a boudoir in a château rather than an Abbess's "cell" in Monastica; for they are no ascetics, but enjoy life in their way,

those innocent, child-like, sunny-natured nuns of Moldavian Monastica.

Mother Veronica sat in deep thought, the sun upon her silvered hair, primroses and an antique vellum "Horæ" lying together in her lap—the fresh gifts of Nature with the worn manual of Superstition—venerable and happy in her serene old age. The primroses were untouched, the missal lay unread, Mother Veronica was looking out at the blue mountain line, and thinking of the stranger to whom she had felt almost that mother's tenderness which her life had not known, though in her eyes he was godless and a lost soul, a grand Pagan whom it was hopeless to save; thinking wistfully, for she believed that on earth she would never see him again. Suddenly she heard in the convent aisle without, the iron ring of a tread more like that of the Knights Templar, who had once held Monastica, than like the subdued slow step of her order;—she started and listened; could it be that the Virgin had heard her prayers, and allowed her to see the heathen who was, perchance, so wrongly dear to her? She hardly hoped it; yet she listened with longing anxiety. It was very sinful to so wish to behold the mere mortal life of a heretic!

But that he was such an infidel, Mother Veronica

wholly forgot when the door unclosed, and a sister ushered in Erceldoune.

"Ah, my son, the blessing of Heaven rest on you!" cried the Abbess, stretching out her hands with fervent welcome. "I never thought to see you here again. It is good—very good—to have remembered us, and come back from your great world to Monastica!"

"Far from it, madam," answered Erceldoune, bending lower to the simple venerable woman than he had ever bent to the patrician coquettes of Liramar. "It would be sorely ungrateful if I could enter Moldavia without seeing those to whom I owe it that I am not now rotting in its pine-woods."

"And you are recovered—entirely?"

"Entirely. My strength is wholly returned."

Her hands still holding his, Mother Veronica drew him nearer to the light, looking upward at him with as much pride and tenderness as though he had been her son by blood instead of by the mere title of the Church; then a sudden remembrance lightened her aged face and sunken eyes with all the innocent eagerness of a life which lives in solitude, where each chance trifle is a rare and wondrous event.

"Ah! my son—I forgot—I have so much

to tell you. I have seen the woman of your picture!"

"*You have!* And she——?"

"She saved your life,—yes; but it is all so strange! Listen—I will tell you——"

"Do, for God's sake! And she——?"

"Oh, my son, do not take a holy name in vain for a woman's perishable beauty!" said Mother Veronica, with plaintive reproof, while Erceldoune crushed his heel into the maple-wood floor in a sore effort to contain his soul in patience. "It was about a month ago that at a Salutation to the Virgin, to which, as you know, strangers come sometimes from Piatra, even sometimes as far as from Ronan and Jassy, I lifted my eyes during the service—I cannot tell how I came to do so wicked a thing—and I saw—ah! I thought I should have fainted!—in the shadow of another aisle, living before me, the glorious beauty that you painted in our altar-piece! I never sinned so deeply in my life before, but, though I never raised my eyes again, I thought of nothing but her all through the mass. If she tempted me so, how must she have tempted the souls of men! She is more lovely even than your portrait——"

"But her name—her country?" broke in Ercel-

doune, impatiently. "Why have withheld from me that she——"

"My son, I will tell all I know if you do not hasten me," pleaded Mother Veronica. "When the Salutation was over, Sister Eunice came and told me that a lady sought to see me; I bade her bring her here, and it was here I saw her—the woman of your picture, with those deep marvellous eyes, and that hair which is like light. Ah! how wicked it is that a mere earthly beauty of form can touch us and win us as can never all the spiritual beauty of the saints. One sees at once that she is of noble rank, and young, but she is a woman of the world—too much a woman of the world! She apologised to me with a proud grace that the base born never can have, my son (though we ought to believe that the Father has made all equal), and said she came to ask about a stranger who had been succoured by us in the autumn, and been cured of dangerous wounds; had he suffered much—had he been wholly restored? Then I knew that what we had deemed delirium had been the truth, and that this was she who had saved you; but I said nothing of that, only answered her fully of your illness and of your cure, and then added to her, as it were carelessly, that in your convalescence you had painted

an altar-piece for Monastica—would she like to see it? She assented—she has a voice as low and rich as music—and I led her to the chapel, and pointed to the Virgin's altar, where it hangs. She went forward—and I saw her start; she gave a stifled cry, and then stood silent. She could not but see that it was her own beauty. I let her stand awhile, for I thought she was agitated; then I went forward, and said to her, 'He who painted that picture, my daughter, when he left it with me, said, "If you ever see a woman whose portrait you recognise in it, she will be the woman to whom I first owed the rescue of my life. Tell her Fulke Erceldoune waits to pay his debt." My daughter, you are she.' Her lips quivered a little though she answered me coldly. 'He said that? How could he have known?—how could he have remembered?' 'How well he remembered, my daughter,' I answered her, 'his painting says. Your words confess that you first saved this stranger's life; why conceal so noble an act of mercy?' She turned her eyes on mine, half mournfully, half haughtily. 'I had due reason. It was little that I did for this English traveller. My hound led me to him, and I found him, as I supposed, dying—left for dead, doubtless, by some forest brigands. I did what I could to revive him—

it was scarce anything to name—and stayed with him while I sent my dog to bring assistance. That was all; it merited no gratitude, and I had no thought that he would ever know it, since he was unconscious all the time I watched him.' 'But you were in peril, my daughter? If the brigands had returned——' Ah, my son, if you could have seen the proud beauty of her face as she smiled on me! 'Is life so beloved a thing, that we must be too great cowards to chance its loss when another is in extremity, and needs us?' The words were so courageous, and yet so mournful! She is as beautiful as the morning, but I fear she is not happy."

Erceldoune paced the little chamber to and fro for a second, his arms folded, his head bent, his heart moved to a strange softness and pain that his life had never known; then he paused abruptly before the Abbess.

"Her name! Tell me her name!"

"Alas, my son! I cannot."

"*Cannot?* Great Heaven! you never let her go unknown?"

"Do not be angered, my son. It was not in my power to prevent it; she chose it to remain secret. All I know is, that she let fall a gold perfume-box as

she left my cell, and that as I lifted it, and sent Daughter Virginia with it after her, I saw engraven on the lid one word only—'Idalia.'"

"Idalia!"

He repeated the word with passionate tremulous eagerness; it seemed to him the sweetest poem poets could ever dream, the fairest echo that ever the world heard, the treasury of all that womanhood could give of beauty, grace, and love, that single Greek name of the woman he pursued; yet,—it could serve him in nothing.

"Idalia!—Idalia! That will do nothing to find her? Oh, my God! she is lost to me as she was lost in Sicily!"

The words were more full of bitterness than any she had ever heard wrung from him by his physical anguish, while he paced up and down the narrow chamber.

"It is very strange; but indeed it was no fault of mine," pleaded the Abbess, a little piteously, for she saw that it was a heavy blow to him, and she dreaded alike to see the pain or the wrath of that unchastened Pagan nature before which the Mother Superior, used only to deal with and chasten or solace the untroubled souls of guileless women, whose heaviest sin was an omitted prayer, felt help-

less. "And perhaps it is for the best that you should not know where to seek her, for hers is a wondrous sorcery, and it might be a fatal snare: if it is such a delight of the eyes to me, what might it be to you? It is not well to see anything of a mere human earthly charm so glorious as that."

Erceldoune stretched his hand out with an irrepressible gesture.

"But surely you told her, at the least, how great I held the debt I owe to her?—how deeply I felt her humanity, her heroism, her self-devotion to a stranger? How——"

"I told her, my son, that in all your delirium you spoke but of her, and that on awaking to consciousness your first question was for her, even as the first effort of your strength was to paint her own loveliness upon the canvas; and she heard me silently, and seemed profoundly moved that you should have thus remembered her," pursued innocent Mother Veronica, placidly, unwitting in her serenity that she was but "heaping fuel to the burning," while where Erceldoune leaned in the shadow his face flushed hotly again. Spoken out in the calm words of the Superior, his passionate memory of an unknown woman looked more wild and more tender than he liked that anything of his should look. "I

spoke of you as I felt," went on Mother Veronica; "and she seemed to like to hear all, which was but natural, since she saved your life, and found you so cruelly injured in the forest; though she said that you owed her little, and that the dog had done more for you than she had. She looked long at the painting. 'The English stranger has honoured me too much,' she said at last; 'and so, holy mother, have you. The portrait—*my* portrait—should not be chosen for any altar-piece. Hang it, rather, in the shadow, with that Guido's Magdalen.' And with those words, my son, she bade me farewell; and I felt, all sinful though it was to feel such a thing for a mere mortal creature, as though the light had sunk out of Monastica when she was gone. Ah! just such beauty must have been the beauty of the glorified Dorothëa, when she brought the summer-roses and the golden fruit of Paradise at midnight to the stricken unbeliever!"

Erceldoune stood long silent, leaning against the embrasure, with his head bent; except under the immediate impulse of passion, many words were not natural to him.

"Is she married?" he said, suddenly, after a lengthened pause.

"I cannot tell, my son. She said nothing of

herself. Her dress is rich, her manners noble. I know no more. She had many rings upon her left hand; one of them might be her marriage-ring. That she is not happy, I am certain."

Erceldoune crushed a bitter oath to silence. Not even to know *this* of her!

"Can I see the picture in the chapel?"

"Surely, my son. Do we not owe it to your art and your gift?"

His step woke the hollow echoes of the arched aisles as it rang on the stone pavements, and he passed into the chapel, far famed through all the Danubian Principalities for its antiquity, its riches, and its architecture, which closely resembled that of the Bohemian Chancery at Vienna. It was cool and dark and still, the glass stained with deep and glowing hues, the lofty arches stretching on till they were lost in gloom; and the face of his own painting, with its brilliant light, looked down like that of an angel from out the depths of shade. Thus had he seen her,—and seen only to lose her once more,—in the violet shadows and the falling night of the Sicilian seas.

Erceldoune stood there long, and in silence, as before him a Templar, leal to his monastic oath through half a lifetime, might have stood before the

same altar, seeing in the virginal beauty of some sacred artist's painted thought only the loveliness of the woman before whom the asceticism of the soldier, priest, and anchorite had flung down sword and shield and cross, and bowed and fallen.

The Abbess Veronica looked at him with an earnest sadness, then went and laid her hand on his arm:

"Do not think so much of her, my son; it may be she is not worthy of it. A beauty divine she has; but it is not always in those of fairest form that the divine spirit rests. There is mystery with her; and where there is mystery, my son, all is not well. I doubt me if she be what you deem her. The belladonna is beautiful, but living in darkness, and loving the shade, it brings only poison and death. Take to your bosom that flower alone, which lives in the clearness of light, and folds no leaves unopened from your eyes."

He gave a movement of impatience, but he answered nothing: it was not in him to take shelter beneath denial, when to give the lie would have been to lie, and he turned and walked up and down the aisle, where, a few months before, the living presence of the woman he sought had been, his tread re-echoing through the silent chapel, in which

the step of man had never been heard since the days of the Temple Knights. And as he went, pacing slowly to and fro in the religious solitudes, he saw nothing but the face above the Virgin's altar—the face of the woman on whose heart he had rested, from whose hand he had drunk the living waters of life, and yet who was lost to him—a stranger and untracked—in the wide wilderness of the world.

He stayed that night at Monastica.

The nuns were innocent as children, and though reluctant to receive a male guest, entertained him cheerfully, once admitted. He was reluctant to leave the place where at least one could speak to him of the woman whose memory was so dear, where at least her presence once had been, and still seemed to him to sanctify the very stones that she had trodden. Mother Veronica made him welcome with almost a mother's devotednes: this strong, fiery, lawless heathen, as she held him, had grown very dear to her, and having eased her conscience by warning him, she could no longer resist the temptation, so strong in a monotonous and one-idea'd life, of dwelling on the romance and mystery of the single episode which had broken the even tenor of her days. He listened over and over again to the same words, never wearying of them, for he was in love with his

own ideal as utterly as any lad of twenty. In the pause between her religious services, in the hush of the spring-tide, while she walked with him in the still convent gardens, and at the supper she shared with him in her pretty little cell, with its maple wood, its sunny pictures, and its fresh primroses, that had nothing of the recluse, as the meal had nothing of the ascetic in its frothing chocolate, golden honey, milk-white cakes, dainty river fish, and newly laid eggs, the Abbess spoke incessantly and garrulously of but one theme. She did penance for the indulgence every ten minutes, it is true, by a gentle little pleading sermon against the desire of the eye, the perishableness of earthly beauty, and the danger of erring idolatry; but the penance done, she perpetually nullified it by dwelling, in all her innocent unwisdom, on every grace, on every word, on every charm of the woman against whom, nevertheless, she tenderly warned him. Every syllable she uttered heightened a hundred-fold the sorcery which his lost saviour's memory had for him, and all her simple warnings drifted past his thoughts unheard. A child's hand will sooner stop the seas, when they rise in their wrath, than counsels of caution or of prudence arrest the growth of a great passion.

"Idalia!"

That solitary word seemed all he could see or hear as he sat in the twilight, while the mist slowly stole over the bright primroses, the sculptured ivory Passion, and the silver I.H.S. that glistened on the draperies of the Mother Superior's peaceful altar, as it had once done on the *labarum* of the Constantines.

"Idalia!"

It seemed to fill the night, that single name of the shadow he pursued, as Erceldoune stood on the balcony that ran round the convent, alone, while all around him slept, while the great forests stretched away on every side into the darkness, burying in them the little Swiss-like châlets, in each of which there dwelt, according to Moldavian custom, one nun alone; safe in that lonely wildernes, though with no guardian but her own sanctity.

The stars were bright, the murmurs of innumerable torrents filled the silence, the heavy odours of a million pines rose up from below, and over the far Danubian plains the woods trembled as though stirred by the shadowy hosts of Persian myriads and of Scythian chiefs, of Roman legions and of Avar hordes, whose bones had whitened in their eternal sands, and whose graves were locked in their funereal depths. It was profoundly still,

while from the convent tower the midnight strokes fell slowly, beating out the flight of Time, that in its merciless eternal movement had left of the Great King but the writing on the wall, but the mute story of Assyrian stones; and that had swept down, like insects of a summer day, the mailed and mighty cohorts who once had passed the windings of the Ister, with the shouts of "Ave Cæsar Imperator!" proudly heralding the passage of the Last Constantine. Where were they—the innumerable Peoples of the Past?

Where were they?—bright Greek and delicate Persian, ravening Hun and haughty Latin, swift Scythian and black-browed Tartar, brute Mogul and patrician Roman, whose bones lay buried there, unmarked, unparted, in the community of the grave?

The Danube rolled along its majestic waters, while centuries and cycles passed; sweeping onward under the same sun that once flashed on the diadem of Darius; flowing in solemn melody through the night under the same stars which the wistful eyes of Julian once studied in the still lonely watches of his tent. The river was living still, dark and changeless, rushing ever onward to the sea; but they, the fleeting and innumerable phan-

toms, the Generations of the Dead, were gone for evermore.

As he stood there in the midnight solitude, it seemed to him as if, in the midst of his virile and adventurous life, he suddenly paused for the first time, and thought itself paused with him; it was because he was, for the first time, a dreamer—for the first time a lover.

Something of melancholy, of foreboding, were on him; the world for once seemed weary to him; he wondered why men lived only to suffer and to die. In all his years before he had never felt this; they had been filled with rapid action and vigorous strength, finding their joys in the close conflict of peril, in the mere sense of abundant and powerful life, in the victories of an athlete wrestling breast to breast with the lion or bear, and in the swift sweep of a wild gallop through jungles of the tropics, or cold crisp dawns of northern moorlands. Now he knew that his life was no longer under his own governance; now he knew that the vague fantasy of a baseless dream was dearer to him than anything which the earth held. It had its sweetness and its bitterness both: she lived; she had remembered him; she was not happy; this was all he knew, but it was enough to fill the night with her

memory, and from those brief words to build a world.

His imagination had never awakened before, but now his fancies thronged with dreams, wild as a youth's, vague as a poet's, and dazzling as

Fireflies tangled in a silver braid.

Thus, before him, in the Danubian solitudes, once the battle-field of nations, the Persian of the Immortal Guard had thought of some gazelle-eyed Lydian, seen once, never to be forgot, in the Temple of the Sun; the wild Bulgarian had felt his savage eyes grow dim with tears of blood when the Byzantine arrow pierced his breast, and he remembered some Greek captive, loved as tigers love, who never again would lie within his arms, and to whose feet he would never bring again the pillage of the palace and the trophies of the hunt; the Roman Legionary leaning on his spear, on guard, while the cohorts slept in their black frozen camp, had dreamed of a gold-haired barbarian far away in the utmost limits of the western isles, whom he had loved under the green shadows of fresh Britannic woods, as he had never loved the haughty Roman matron who bore his name where tawny Tiber rolled. Thus, before him, men had mused, in those forsaken soli-

tudes, of the light of a woman's smile, of the softness of a woman's memory, where, standing in the silence of the night, he heard the fall of the torrents thunder through the stillness, and watched the black pines tower upward into the starlighted gloom. Nations had perished on those shadowy battle-plains; but the same river rolled unchanged, and unchanged the same dreams of passion dreamed themselves away.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BADGE OF THE SILVER IVY.

It was midnight and mid-winter in Paris, snow lying thick on the ground; dead lying thick in the Morgue; outcasts gnawing the bones dogs had left, and shivering on church-steps built by pious crowds, who glorified God and starved their brethren; aristocrates skimming over the ice, flashing their diamonds in the torchlight, warm in their swansdown and ermine; wretches who dared be both poor and honest, sleeping, famine-stricken, under bridge-arches, as such a twin-insult to a wise world deserved; philosophers, male and female, who were vile, and got gold, and *joliment jouaient leurs mondes*, drinking Côte and Rhine wines, and laughing at life from velvet couches. It was a bitter icy night, and the contrasts of a great city were at their widest and sharpest, as the chiffonnier searched in the snow for offal as treasure, and the Princess lost in the snow, as a mere bagatelle, wealth in an

emerald that would have bought bread for a million; as a young child, half naked, sobbed, homeless, under the pitiless cold, and a State Messenger, wrapped in furs, was rolled in his travelling carriage through the bright gaslit streets. The Royal Courier was lying, stretched nearly at length on his carriage-bed, while he dashed through the capital full speed, not losing a moment to get through to Persia.

There was plenty of time to sleep while the train tore through the night to Marseilles, and he raised himself on his arm and looked out at the old familiar, welcome streets of Paris; a mistress for every new-comer, a friend to every well-worn returning traveller, a syren ever fresh, ever dear, ever unrivalled. As he did so, the carriage was passing down the Rue Lépelletier and before the Opéra, where the doors had just opened for one of those balls to which all Paris proper (or improper) flocks. The throng was great; the wheel of his carriage nearly locked in another, whose gas-lamps, flashing off the snow, lighted up the face of a woman within, with the azure of sapphires glancing above her brow. The Queen's Messenger started up from his carriage-couch and threw himself forward; his postboy saved the collision, his horses dashed on without a pause.

He flung himself back among his furs, with a fierce bitterness in his soul:

"Good God, again!—and *there!*"

The carriage whirled on, leaving the masked throngs to flock to the wild Rigolboche of the Opéra.

That night under the glitter of a chandelier in the Hôtel Mirabeau, before a fire which shed its warmth over the green velvet and walnut wood, the ormolu and silver, the mirrors and consoles of the chamber, two men sat smoking over claret and olives, having dined alone, by a miracle, in the midst of the laughing, dazzling, contagious gaieties of peopled Paris. In these days confederates meet over liqueurs and cigarettes, instead of in subterranean caverns; and conspirators plan their checkmates in a coffee-room, an opera-box, or a drive to an imperial stag-hunt, instead of by midnight, under masks, and with rapiers drawn.

One of the men was Victor Vane, the other that dashing Free Lance, that Monodist of the Sugared Violet, that political brigand of the Carpathian Pass, to whom the telegram had been addressed as to the Count Conrad Constantine Phaulcon: a man in physical beauty, physical prowess, talent, wit, and bearing, far the superior of the Englishman, yet

whom the latter dominated and held in check, simply by that fine and priceless quality, which is colourless because inscrutable, and irresistible because prévoyant—Acumen. It crowns genius, and dethrones kings.

Socially, there was the same anomaly between them. Vane, of whose antecedents none knew very much (except that his mother had been a Venetian, wedded, but not of very fair fame, and his father a decayed English gentleman, chiefly resident in Naples, both of whom had been dead long ago), with no title, with no connections, with a somewhat notorious association with the ultra parties of Southern Europe, and with no particular quality of social distinction beyond his perfect breeding, his scientific whist, and his inimitable tact, was, nevertheless, seen at all courts save those of Vienna and the Vatican, and had made himself not only received, but welcomed in many of the best families and highest sets in all countries. Phauloon, on the other hand, in whose veins ran blood of purest Hellenic breed, who could trace his chain of descent unbroken, who had a marvellous beauty, a marvellous grace, and a marvellous tact, with many other gifts of fortune and nature, was contraband of courts, had long since been exiled from "good society;"

and was considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the Bohemian class of Free Lances, the Chevaliers d'Industrie of politics, the wild lawless Reiters of plot and counterplot, of liberalism and intrigue, who are the abomination of the English mind (which commonly understands not one whit about them), and are the arch disturbers of continental empires, where the people recognise at the bottom of all their schemes and crimes the germ and memory of one great, precious, living truth and treasure—Liberty. At the core, both these men were as deeply dyed, and as utterly unscrupulous, the one as the other, the only difference being that the one was the more wilily dangerous, the other the more visibly lawless; both deserved equally to be out of the presence-chamber of princes and the pale of aristocratic cliques, yet Vane was accepted as a man of fashion by the most fastidious, Phaulcon was excluded by the least fastidious, as among the "equivocal." What made the difference?

Victor would have told again, with his charming low laugh, that when quiet on his lips was always in his sunny eyes, which dazzled women and never met men fairly—"Acumen!"

"I cannot imagine how you could miss him!" he was saying now, breaking a macaroon, with a slight

superb disdain in his tone, as of a man who never missed anything.

"How should I know?" cried Phaulcon, with petulant impatience. "We fired half a dozen balls at him, the man fell dead, never stirred, never breathed; who on the face of the earth could imagine he was going to get up again?"

"Carissimo," said Vane, with soft persuasion. "Why *will* you persist in that most deleterious habit of trusting to chance, and satisfying yourself with 'appearances' and with 'beliefs?' Nothing more fatal. Always make sure. Just a farewell plunge of an inch of steel into the aorta, and you are always certain."

The picture-like beauty of Phaulcon's face reddened with a momentary flush, and he tossed back his long hair.

"Parbleu! one is not an assassin?"

"Since when have you discovered that?"

The flush grew darker on Count Conrad's forehead; he moved restlessly under the irony, and drank down a draught of red fiery Roussillon without tasting it more than if it had been water. Then he laughed; the same careless musical laughter with which he had made the requiem over a violet—a laugh which belonged at once to the

most careless and the most evil side of his character.

"Since sophism came in, which was with Monsieur Cain, when he asked, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' It was ingenious that reply; creditable to a beginner, without social advantages. 'An assassin!' Take the word boldly by the beard, and look at it. What is there objectionable?"

"Nothing—except to the assassinated."

"It has had an apotheosis ever since the world began," pursued Phaulcon, unheeding, in his bright vivacity. "Who are celebrated in scripture? Judith, Samuel, David, Moses, Joab. Who is a patriot? Brutus. Who is an immortal? Harmodius and Aristogiton. Who is a philosopher? Cicero, while he murmurs '*Vixerunt!*' after slaying Lentulus. Who is a hero? Marius, who nails the senators' heads to the rostræ. Who is a martyr? Charles who murders Strafford. What is religion? Christianity, that has burnt and slain millions. Who is a priest? Calvin, who destroys Servetus; or Pole, who kills Latimer, which you like. Who is a saint? George of Cappadocia, who slaughters right and left. Who is a ruler? Sulla, who slays Ofella. Who is a queen? Christina, who stabs Monaldeschi; Catherine, who strangles Peter; Isabella, who

slays Moors and Jews by the thousand. Murderers all! Assassination has always been deified; and before it is objected to, the world must change its creeds, its celebrities, and its chronicles. 'Monsieur, you are an assassin,' says an impolite world. 'Messieurs,' says the polite logician, 'I found my warrant in your Bible, and my precedent in your Brutus. What you deify in Aristogiton and Jael, you mustn't damn in Ankarström and me.' Voilà! What could the world say?"

"That you would outwit Belial with words, and beguile Beelzebub out of his kingdom with sophistry," laughed Vane, with a quiet lazy enjoyment. "Caro, caro! with such 'exquisite subtleties in speech, how is it that you are so uncertain in acts, so rash even occasionally, and so—just now and then—so weak?"

Phaulcon laughed too.

"Because, intellectually, I am quite a devil, but morally, perhaps, keep a pin's point of humanity still. I am ashamed of it, but what would you have? Achilles could be shot in the heel."

And there was the very slightest shadow of bitterness in the words, which showed that there was a "pin's point," too, of truth in them. Vane looked at him with his quiet amusement undisturbed.

"And your delicate susceptibilities will let you shoot a man but not stab him? What an artist's eyes for imperceptible shades of colour!"

And it was with that gentle mocking banter that he had killed—perseveringly and remorselessly killed—any lingering touches of nobler things, any stray instincts towards holier impulses, that he had found in that unscrupulous, brilliant, lawless Free Lance, who laughed now with an evil glitter in his eyes, and a sense of ridicule and shame for the single impulse that had moved him with something true and human.

"Madre di Christo! shot or steel, I would have given him either willingly enough when he outwitted us. Curse him! if ever we come across each other, it shall go worse with him for that trick."

"Oh no," interposed Victor, languidly. "No, certainly not; let him alone. Never *kill* save when there is necessity; besides, any row between him and you might draw attention to that little affair, and though we must make the sacrifice of those unpleasant trifles to *la haute politique*, it does not do for them to get wind. They do not dream we were in it. They have plenty of toy-terriers, and yapping puppies, and truffle-dogs with a good nose for a perquisite at the English Foreign Office, but they have

no bloodhounds in the bureau—they can't *track*. À propos of tracking—I tell you who I wish were more completely pledged to us—— "

" Lilmarc, of course. So do I, but he is caution itself; and I believe, on my faith, that a white wand at Vienna would buy up what little Magyar spirit there is in him. He is a fox, with the heart of an ape!"

Lilmarc was the Gräf von Lilmarc, an Hungarian noble of splendid possessions, and of wavering allegiance—now to Austria, and now to his Fatherland. Vane trifled gravely with his olives.

" But Lilmarc has one weakness—women. Cannot the Countess Vassalis seduce him ?"

Phaulcon gave a despairing shrug of his shoulders.

" There is no reliance on women! I don't know what has come to Idalia of late; she is not herself, and is oftener dead against us now than anything else. I have asked her to make play with Lilmarc; she might have him in her hands like wax in no time, but she will not; she is wayward, cold, haughty——"

"Perhaps she has taken a lover you know nothing about," said Victor, with a smile in his eyes. He liked his friend and confederate as well perhaps as any one in the world, but he liked better still tormenting him.

The blood flushed Phaulcon's forehead.

"If I thought that——" Then he laughed the melodious laugh which was in harmony with the reckless poetic grace of the man's beauty. "Oh, no! She only sees through us, and has found out that our sublime statue of Liberty has very clay feet. *Moitié marbre et moitié boue*, as Voltaire said of the Encyclopédie."

"Why do you let her see the clay feet, then?"

"Why? Idalia is not a woman that you can blind. You have not seen her."

"Unhappily, no! I have heard men rave of her, as they never raved of anything, I think; and I know how madly they have lost their heads for her—to our advantage. Miladi's loveliness has done more for the cause than half our intrigues. She is now at Naples?"

"She was; to-night she is in Paris."

"In Paris?"

"Yes; I thought you knew it? In half an hour I am going back to take her to the Opéra ball, Lilmarc is sure to be there, and she must beguile him out of his reticence and caution if she can; there is not a better place for enticing Tannhäuser into the Venusberg than *en domino* in an opera box, while all the world is going mad below."

"*D'avance*, I am jealous both of Lilmarc and of you!" cried Vane, with that easy worldly serenity to which such a normal and barbaric passion as jealousy seems wholly antagonistic and impossible. "At last I shall see her, then—your beautiful Vassalis! Shall I come with you?"

"No; better come up to the box when Lilmarc is not there. If he saw you with her he might take fright and cry off; if you have an ivy spray at your button-hole she will understand and admit you, whether I be there or not. Here!" With the words he opened a small, long bonbon-box he took from his coat, and tossed Vane one of the little sprays of silver ivy that it held—the badge which all those who would be recognised by Idalia, Countess Vassalis, must wear on their dominoes that night.

"Thanks," said Victor, as he slipped it in his waistcoat-pocket. "I shall be there by one o'clock at latest. Idalia—this wonderful Idalia! —how often I have missed her, how often I have longed to see her; the fairest conspirator in Europe!"

The Bal de l'Opéra was brilliant, crowded, dizzy, mad with the very insouciant and reckless gaiety of the Prince who invented it, as though the spirit of

Philippe d'Orléans still presided over the revelries. Dominoes here, dominoes there; gold spangles, silver spangles, rose and white, blue and amber, violet and grey, scarlet and black, mock jewels flashing like suns and glancing like stars, "*débardeurs*" and "*grands bébés,*" Pierrots and Scaramouches, white shoulders and black masks, fluttering rosettes and dainty signal-roses, were all pell-mell in glittering tumult and contagious riot; and Vane in a domino of imperial blue, with the silver ivy spray fastened on his shoulder, made his way through the crowd, not dancing, not heeding much the invitations, mockeries, and whispers of a score of charming masks, but looking incessantly upward at the boxes.

He did not see what he looked for; but he did see every now and then, till they had numbered more than a dozen, on an Ottoman, on a Knight of Malta, on a Pharaoh, on a Poissarde, on a black domino, on a scarlet, on a purple, on a violet, the little spray of ivy like his own, that had come out of Phaulcon's bonbon-box.

"Che, che, ch-e-e!" murmured Victor, with the southern expletive. "Miladi Idalia will have a large gathering. Is she as beautiful as they say?—one would think so, to judge by her power."

He got as much out of the press as he could, and moved on in silence, heeding nothing of the *cancan d'enfer* and *chaîne du diable* dancing round him. He was not a man who cared for noisy dissipations; they had no sort of attraction for him; indeed, dissipation at all had not much, unless it were associated with the intricacies of intrigue. He cared for nothing that was not *rusé;* his own life was emphatically so; he had begun it with serious disadvantages: first of birth, which, though gentle on one side, was not distinguished; of fortunes which were very impoverished; of a world in which he had no place, and which had no want of him; of a temperament that was intensely ambitious, intensely dissatisfied, and intensely speculative. Despite all these drawbacks, by dint of tact and finesse, he had now, when he was but thirty, moved for many years in some of the best society of Europe; he lived expensively, though he was very poor; and he was deferred to, though no one could have said why they gave him such a preference. He had the spirit of the gambler, with the talent of the statesman, and he found the world one great gaming-table. He could not be a statesman in his own country; England will not accept as statesmen what

she is pleased to term "adventurers," whereby she loses all men of genius, and gets only trained men of business: hence he had thrown himself, partly in pique, more in ambition, into the interests of a certain *ultra* political party abroad. Bred in Venetia, he hated Austria with a cold but very virulent hatred. Rash only in the height and unscrupulousness of his ambitions, he adopted politics—or, perhaps, to give them their true and naked name, conspiracies—as the scaling-ladder for his own advancement. If all the waters round him were lashed into a tempest, he knew so cautious and tried a swimmer as himself would have a fair chance to come uppermost while other men went down. He loved intrigue for mere intrigue's sake, and power for the simple pleasure of holding it. Serene, sunny, impassive, and even indifferent in bearing, and, indeed, in temperament, he could seize savagely, and hold pitilessly. In deceiving any one, Vane had no sort of scruple—it was only an artistic kind of exercise; but kill anybody, or provoke anybody, he would not think of doing—it was a barbaric, blundering style of warfare. He never went out of his way in wrath; but all the same, he never missed his way to revenge. He had a good deal of ice in his nature; but it was, perhaps, the most dangerous of ice—that which

smiles in the sun, and breaks, to drop you into the grave. In the world of fashion, Victor was *but* a man of fashion—popular, very successful with women, an admirable tactician, and a guest who brought his own welcome everywhere by his easy social accomplishments, and his languid gentle temper, which had over and over again smoothed a quarrel, prevented an embarrassment, hushed a provocation unuttered, and arranged a misunderstanding before it grew to a rupture. In that world unseen, which revolves under the rose, he was very much more than this, and had a sway and a place of considerable influence in a society of politicians whose members are in all classes and orders, and whose network spreads more widely and finely beneath society than society dreams, stretching from Paris to Caucasus, and from the Quadrilateral to the Carpathians, in their restless scheming for the future, and their plans for the alteration of the map of Europe. It was not, however, of the French in Rome, the White Coats in Venice, the Muscovites in Warsaw, or the state of siege in Galicia, that he was thinking now, as he went through the wild, panting, crushed crowd of dancers at the French Opera; it was of something far fairer, if equally dangerous—a woman.

"Is she here?" he asked a violet domino, who wore, like himself, the badge of silver ivy.

"No. Perhaps she will not come, after all!"

"Oh yes, she will."

"How do you know? Have you seen her?"

"No, I never saw her. But Conrad has been dining with me, and left me to go and fetch her."

The violet domino went on, without a word.

"He's in love with her, too; he can't speak of her without a tremor in his voice; and by his voice he is nobody less than Prince Carlo himself," thought Vane, glancing back at his silver ivy, in apprehension lest it should be torn off or stolen in the press. "What can her power be? Ah, bah! What was that of the L'Enclos? Nobody knew, but nobody resisted."

And he went on, humming to himself Scarron's quatrain:

> "Elle avait au bout de ses manches,
> Une paire de mains si blanches;
> Que je voudrais en verité,
> En avoir été souffleté!"

"Ah! there she is!"

The stifled exclamation fell on his ear, low spoken but impulsively passionate, as only a lover's en-

tranced recognition is. He turned, and saw a mask in Venetian costume, to whose shoulder was also fastened the little badge of ivy.

"One of us! Who, I wonder? He, too, cannot speak of her without betraying himself," thought Victor, as he swung round quickly, and glanced over the boxes. In one of them he saw what he sought: with black laces and azure silks sweeping about her, caught here and there with sprays of silver ivy, a woman masked, who, leaning her arm on the front of the box, and her cheek upon her hand, gazed down into the tumult of colour and of movement that made up the ball below. Her face was unseen, but the lips, exquisite as the lips of a Greuze painting, had a certain proud weariness on them; and in the bright richness of her hair, in the elegance of her hand and arm, in the languor and grace of her attitude and her form, there were sufficient sureties of the beauty that would be seen if the black mask that veiled it were removed.

The Venetian domino looked at her long, then, with a stifled sigh, turned away.

"You have loved her?" whispered Vane.

The domino started, and glanced at the ivy branch on Victor's arm.

"To my cost," he said bitterly, as he plunged

among the whirling dancers, and was lost in the spangled and riotous multitude.

His hearer smiled. A woman who owned a limitless power, and was unscrupulous, and without pity in its use, was, perhaps, the only woman he was capable of respecting. Cold as he was, and but little accessible to anything of passion, for which his blood ran too suavely and too tranquilly, he felt something of warm, eager curiosity sweep over him, and his pulse beat a shade quicker with a new expectation. He had long heard of this sorceress—he had never seen her; and he threaded his way with impatience through the Arléquins, Pierrots, masks, and costumés, till he reached the stairs, and mounted them lightly and rapidly towards the box, opened the door, and entered.

It was filled with dominoes, all decorated with the silver spray, and all bending towards her with eyes that told their admiration through their masks, and voices that murmured flatteries, homage, and wit—to an inattentive ear. She lifted her head, and turned slightly as the door unclosed; her eyes dwelt on him through her mask, noting the badge he wore. She bowed languidly.

"Enter, monsieur."

And Victor Vane, all impassive diplomatist, all-

rusé man of the world though he was, felt a thrill run through him, and a hot breath seem to pass, sirocco-like, over his life, as he heard the nameless magic of that melodious lingering voice, and found himself, for the first time, in the presence of that Queen of the Silver Ivy, who was known as—Idalia.

Could Erceldoune have seen afar as Surrey saw his mistress, the magic glass would not have brought him such secure and happy peace as came with the vision of Geraldine. Late into the dawn as the night express plunged through the heart of France downward to where Marseilles lay beside the southern sea, through the cold clear night, the plains white with sheeted snow, the black and spectral woods, and the sleeping hamlets, with the pointed towers of châteaux and manoirs rising against the leaden clouds, behind him: the City that Julian loved sparkled under a million lights; strangely altered since the days when Julian wrote in adoring phrase of the studious and tranquil retirement of his austere and beloved Lutetia. The bright tide of Parisian life was at its gayest in the first hours of the mid-winter morning; and in one of its richest quarters an opera-supper was at the height of its wit and of its brilliancy. The guests had come from the Opera

ball, the dominoes powdered with silver violets, gold bees, diamond clusters, and glittering stars, were tossed down on the couches with the Venetian masks; being no tinsel costumes of the Passage des Panoramas, hired for a night, but the silk and satin elegancies of a court costumier, for men who wore these trifles at the masked fêtes of the Tuileries, in the Colonna palace in Carnival, and at the Veglione with noble masquers of Florence. The supper-room was a long and handsome chamber, hung with rose silk, flowered with silver, with crystal chandeliers flashing globes of light, and with a meal of the choicest extravagance on the table, about which half a dozen men and but one woman were gathered.

She—alone there at the head of her table, with her bouquet lying idly by her little army of deep claret-glasses, broad champagne goblets, and tiny spiral mousselines for liqueurs—was well worth a host of women less fair. Marie de Rohan,—when Buckingham and Holland and Lorraine, and all that glittered greatest at two Courts were at her feet, and even the Iron Cardinal, in the censure of his blackest enmity, could not wholly keep his eyes from being dazzled by the shine of the arch-intriguer's golden hair,—was not more beautiful than she. Many

would have added, also, that the Duchesse de Chevreuse was not more dangerous.

That her form and her face were perfect, was not half nor a tithe of her resistless charm; it lay in still more than these, in every glance of her eyes, blue-black like the gazelle's, in every slight smile that crossed her proud lips, in all the sunlit lustre on her hair, in all the attitudes of her southern grace, in every movement, accent, and gesture of one who knew to its uttermost the spells of her power, and was used to have that power courted, flattered, and obeyed. Her loveliness was very great; but, great as it was, it was comparatively forgotten beside so much that was of still rarer fascination; the patrician ease, the silver wit, the languor and the laughter, the dignity and the nonchalance, the brilliance and the eloquence which turn by turn gave their changing sorcery to her. The innocence and fawn-like shyness of a young girl in her earliest spring may be charming in a pastoral, but in real life they are but awkward and tame beside the exquisite witchery, the polished insouciance, the careless disdain, the cultured fascination of a woman of the world. And these were hers in their utmost perfection; a woman of the world she was in the utmost meaning of the words, and all of victory, of

power, and of beguilement that the world could give were added to the beauty of Idalia, Countess Vassalis.

Men passing her in the open air gazed after her, and felt a sudden giddy worship for what they only saw one moment to lose the next; men who held themselves, by age or coldness, steeled to all the glamour of her sex, fell before her; a few low lingering words from her lips, a breath of fragrance from her laces, the disdain of her delicate scorn, the caress of her soft persuasion, the challenge of her haughty indifference, the sorcery of her sovereign smile,—these at her will did with men as they would; intoxicated them, blinded them, wooed them, bound them, subdued their will, their honour, and their pride; fettered their senses, broke their peace, gave them heaven, gave them hell, won from them their closest secret, and drew them down into the darkest path. A power wide and fatal—a power that she was said, and justly, to have used with little scruple. Who was she—what was she, this beautiful enchantress?

In one word she was—"Idalia."

Her supper-room, perfumed, mellowly lighted, the supper served without ostentation, yet, in truth, as extravagantly as any Court banquet, with summer

fruits though it was mid-winter, with wines Imperial palaces could not have eclipsed, with hookah-tubes curled through the arms of the lounging chairs, and lazily floating in their great bowls of rose-water, was sought with that eagerness for the entrée which is only found when—for far different attractions—men seek either the salons of a Princess of the Ton or of an Empress of the Demi-Monde, the legitimate leader of the Aristocracies, or the yet more potent lawgiver, Anonyma. There was a cosmopolite gathering about her table; the Prince of Viana, a Neapolitan; the Count Phaulcon, a Greek; the Gräf von Lilmarc, a Hungarian; the Marquis de Beltran and the Maréchale d'Ivôre, both of Paris; and one Englishman, Victor Vane. Here, at three o'clock in the morning, with the wine just flushing their thoughts with its warmth, and the scented smoke of the narghilis curling out in languid aërial clouds, they supped *à la Régence* with one of the fairest women of her time; and she—lying back, with her Titian-like draperies, floating out like the deep-hued plumage of some tropic bird, toying with her bouquet of rose japonicas, stooping her lips to the purple depths of her Rousillon or the light sparkles of her Moselle, giving her smile to one, her wit to another, letting the wine steal the

caution from their speech and the fragrant vapour charm the secrets from their heart—knew that her beauty drew them down into its charm and chain, her creatures and her captives, and let the revelry flash on around her, brilliant as the aiglettes in the discarded dominoes; and, while they supped with her in the dawn of the Paris morning, weighed them each and all—at their worth.

Like the jewels that glistened above her fair forehead, they had no value in her eyes save this—what they were worth.

Yet, if ever there were on any face, there were in hers, a haughty power in the arch of the classic brows, a generous grace in the smile of the proud lips, a fearless dignity in the gaze of the long lustrous eyes: looking on her, he who should have had force to resist her beauty would have still said, "If this star have fallen from heaven, it is great still even in its fall."

The Lost Pleïad of fable may sink downwards through the darkness of an eternal night, and become one of the women of earth, earth-stained, earth-debased; but the light of forgotten suns, the glory of forsaken worlds, will be upon her still. It might be so here.

CHAPTER VIII.

"PASSION BORN OF A GLANCE!"

WITH his rifle resting against his knee, its butt bedded in the moss, Erceldoune sat alone a few months later on, in the warm Turkish night, on the Bosphorus shores. He had been shooting sea-gulls, jackals, or a stray hill deer, if such came within range, through the last half of the day, whilst waiting for return despatches in Constantinople, and was now resting on a boulder of rock under a cypress, in his white burnous and sun-helmet, the Monarch, a fine English chestnut, straying loose at his side, a pile of dead game at his feet, and the starlight full on his face, as his eyes looked seaward thoughtfully.

A year had gone by since he had stood before the altar-piece in Monastica, and he was no nearer to either aim of his twofold quest. Power, patience, vigilance, inquiry—all had failed to bring him on the track of his assassins; masked nobles, reckless

adventurers, political secret agents, whichever they were, they had had wit and wisdom to organise their plot so that no trace was left of it and them, and they were beyond all reach of justice, as it seemed, for ever. And of the woman, to whom his only clue was the fairness of her face, he had learned nothing. Shadowy, fugitive, lost in mystery, fantastic as a madman's dream, the hold she had gained upon his thoughts was so utterly foreign to them, that it was the stronger once admitted there. Speculation was wholly antagonistic to him—his nature was forcible, single, vigorous; that he acted greatly when great occasions arose, was due to the mould in which his character was naturally cast, not to any premeditation or previous contest and sifting of principles; he lived, as all bold men do, meeting accident or emergency as it came, content with the activity of the present, looking very rarely to anything past, never to anything future. To sift moral problems, to torture himself with theoretical questions, was what would no more have occurred to Erceldoune than to have sat twisting ropes of the Bosphorus sand; hence the poetic unreality of the memory which possessed him was so abhorrent and antagonistic to his whole temperament that it gave a deeper colouring to his life, once received, than it would have

done to any other to which it had been less alien. Mental disquietude, moral tumult, were unknown to him; a shadowy pursuit, a speculative meditation, were no more in consonance with his character than it would have been to study the stars for Chaldean knowledge of things obscure. Therefore it was with the stronger force and the more unbelief that Erceldoune felt that a well-nigh mythical mystery had power over him, and touched his heart, and stirred his thoughts, as no living woman had ever done through the varied course of his life.

So sacred had the vision of his ministering angel become to him, so intimately interwoven with holiness, loftiness, purity, with the compassion of the luminous eyes, and the hush of the convent solitudes where her picture hung, that to have seen her at the entrance of the Opera had given him a sharp and unwelcome recall to the fact of how utterly he followed—a phantom; how utterly he knew nothing of the woman who had wound herself into his thoughts.

The face which he had seen in the haze of golden light in what he had deemed his dying hour, the loveliness that he had found afresh, only afresh to lose it, in the softness of the Sicilian seas, among the heat, the noise, the maskers, the false brilliants,

false flowers, false laces, false beauty of the Rigolbochade!—it gave Erceldoune a bitter revulsion. True, there might be nothing in it to do so; she might go thither, not to the lawless whirl of the stage, but simply to the boxes as a spectator of the scene below; he knew this was common enough with the proudest and purest of women. Still, it revolted him; his memory of her, his belief in her, was as of a life as unlike, and as above the world, as the stars that shone now across the sea above the classic shores where old Olympus rose. It was an instinct, an impulse, a folly, never analysed, only felt; but to think of her in the gas and throngs of the masked midnight gathering, had given him much such a shock as an artist, soul-devoted to his art, would feel if he could come suddenly on a Raphael or Correggio Madonna made the sign and centre of a riotous casino, or flung by a drunken soldier as worthless loot into the flames of a bivouac fire. This woman, all unknown though she was, had become the single poetic faith, the single haunting weakness of a passionate and earnest temperament, of a changeful and self-sustained life; to have seen her at the Bal de l'Opéra grated jarringly on both.

He thought of it now—and the thought was full

of tempestuous pain to him; to find in her a leader of the artificial worlds of fashion; a coquette, worn, brilliant and chill as her own diamonds, with every smile a beautiful lie, with every glance a demand for accustomed homage, would be scarce better than to find in her one of the *cancan* worshippers of the Opera throng, a *débardeur* in rose and silver, laughing through her velvet mask of Venice! Of all places, of all hours, were there none in the width of the world, in the vastness of time, to have found her in at the last than at midnight in the Rue Lépelletier! Who was she? What was she?—this phantom which pursued him? He wondered restlessly, as he did often in lonely moments like these, while he sat looking down the Bosphorus as the lights gleamed in the distance among the cypress and orange groves of the city of the Moslem, and the far-off cry of the Imaum wailed deep and mournful through the silence, chanting the evening prayer of the Faithful.

As he sat thus he did not notice or hear a man approach him on horseback, riding slowly along the sea-shore, unarmed, and lightly chanting a little French air—a handsome, careless, graceful Greek, whose saddle reveries seemed of the lightest and brightest as he swayed a bunch of Turkish lilies

idly in his hand. His roan mare's hoofs—she was a Barbary—sank noiselessly in the sands; and Erceldoune did not lift his head; he sat motionless under the cypress, resting on his rifle, with the starlight falling fitfully on the white folds of the Arab cloak and the Rembrandt darkness of his face, as his head was bent down and his eyes gazed seaward. The rider came nearer, the hoofs still noiseless on the loose soil; and the hummed song on his lips broke louder, till he sang the words clearly and mellowly on the air, in the mischievous truth of Dufresny's chanson:

> "Deux époux dit un grand oracle,
> Tout d'un coup deviendront heureux,
> Quand deux époux, pas un miracle,
> Pourront devinir veufs touts deux!"

The voice fell on Erceldoune's ear, rich, harmonious, soft as a woman's contralto—the voice that had given the word to "kill the Border Eagle." He started to his feet, flinging back his burnous; in the silvery silent Eastern night they met once more—and knew each other at a glance: there is no instinct so rapid and so unerring as the instinct of a foe. With an oath that rang over the silent seas, Erceldoune sprang forward, as lions spring, and covered him with his rifle; swift as an unconsidered thought,

Phaulcon wheeled and dashed his spurs into his mare's flanks, which sprang off at a headlong gallop a hundred paces in advance by that second's start; in an instant the other caught at the loose rein of his English horse, flung himself into saddle at a leap, and tore down the Bosphorus shore, his rifle levelled, the bridle between his teeth, the Monarch racing at full speed. They were in chase—the pursuer and the pursued.

"Halt!—or you are a dead man."

The challenge rolled through the night out and away to the Bosphorus;—the sole answer of the Greek was to dash the rowels again into his roan's sides, and tear on without other thought than flight, tasting all the long bitterness of death with every time that the beat of the gallop grew closer behind him, with every moment that the shriek of the bullet might whistle down on the wind and the shot pierce his heart from the hand he had once thought picked bare to the bone by the vultures, and buried safe in Moldavian snows.

The blood coursed like fire through Erceldoune's veins, every muscle in him strained like those of a gallant hound in chase; he longed, as the hound longs, to be at the throat of his flying foe: he had a mortal debt to pay, and a deadly wrath to pay it

with; the life of his murderer lay at his mercy, and he panted—with brute thirst, perhaps—to take it, and trample it out on the sands in a just and pitiless vengeance. Yet—he did not fire.

All that was boldest and truest in him refused to let him do as he had been done by;—forbade him to shoot down an unarmed man.

With the hoofs now thundering loud on barren rock, now scattering in clouds the loosened sand, now trampling out the fragrance from acres of wild myrtles and basilica, he rode on in close hot chase, the bridle held in the grip of his teeth, his rifle covering his assassin, while Conrad Phaulcon fled for his life. A single shot, from an aim which never missed, and the coward would be slain as he would have slain, would die the death that he would have dealt; a single ball sent screaming, with its shrill hiss, crash through his spine, and he would drop from the saddle dead as a dog. The Greek knew that as well as the man who held his life in his hands, to take it when he would; and the sweat of his agony gathered in great drops on his brow, the horror of his death-blow seemed to him to quiver already through all his limbs, and as he turned in his saddle once—once only—he saw the stretching head of the Monarch within fifty paces, the face of his pursuer

stern and dark as though cast in bronze, and the long lean barrel of steel glistening bright in the moonlight, lifted to deal him the fate he had dealt.

Onward, while the chant of the Muezzin grew fainter and fainter, and the lighted mosques of Stamboul were left distant behind; onward, through the night lit with a million stars, and all on fire with glittering fire-flies; onward, down the beach of the luminous phosphor-radiant sea, along stretches of yellow sand, under beetling brows of granite, over rocky strips foam-splashed with spray, through fields of sweet wild lavender and roses blowing rich with dew, and tangled withes of tamarind tendrils, and myrtle thickets sloping to the shore, and netted screens of drooping orange-boughs, all white with bloom; onward they swept —hunter and hunted—in a race for life and death.

The Greek was always before him; now and again they well-nigh touched, and the foam from his horse's bit was flung on the steaming flanks of the mare he chased; now and again the dull thud of the hoofs thundered almost side by side as they scattered sand and surf, or trampled out the odorous dews from trodden roses. His enemy's life lay in the

hollow of his hand; he saw the womanish beauty of Phaulcon's face, white and ghastly with a craven terror, turned backward one instant in the light of the moon, and a fierce delight, a just vengeance, heated his senses and throbbed in his veins. He panted for his foe's life, as he hunted him on through the hot night, as the lion in chase may pant for the tiger's; all the passions in him, rare to rise, but wild as the wildest tempest when once roused, were at their darkest, and the creed which chained them, and forbade him to fire on a man unarmed, served but to make each fibre strain, each nerve strengthen, with the fiercer thirst to race his injurer down, and—side to side, man to man—hurl him from his saddle and fling him to earth, held under his heel as he would have held the venomous coil of a snake, imprisoned and powerless, till its poisonous breath was trodden out on the sands.

They rode in hard and fearful chase, as men ride only for life and death.

The surf flashed its salt spray in their eyes as they splashed through the sea-pools girth-deep in water; startled nest-birds flew with a rush from bud and bough, as they crashed through the wild pomegranates; white-winged gulls rose up with a shrill

scream in the light of the moon, as the tramp of horses rang out on the rocks, or scattered the sands in a whirling cloud. There was savage delight to him in the breathless ride, in the intoxication of the odours trampled out from trodden roses and crushed citrons, in the fierce vivid sense of *living*, as he swept down the lonely shore by the side of the luminous sea, hunting his murderer into his lair;—the wolf in its own steppes, the boar in its own pine-forests, the tiger in the hot Indian night, the lion in the palm-plains of Libya; he had hunted them all in their turn, but he had known no chase like that he rode now, when the quarry was not brute, but man.

The snorting nostrils of the Monarch touched the flanks of the straining Barbary, the hot steam of the one blent with the blood-flaked foam of the other. They raced together almost side by side, dashing down a precipitous ridge of shore, entangled with a riotous growth of aloes and oleander: Erceldoune saw that his assassin was making for some known and near lair, as a fox hard-pressed heads for covert, and he thundered on in hotter and hotter pursuit, till the steel of the rifle glittered close in Count Conrad's sight as he turned again, his face livid and the breath

of the horse that was scorching and noxious against his cheek, like the breath of the bloodhound on the murderer's. There were barely six paces between them, going headlong thus down the sloping ridge, and through the cactus thickets; as he turned backward, with that dastard gesture of pitiful despair, they looked on one another by the light of the moon, and the fairness of the Greek's face was ghastly with a coward's prayer, and the dark bronze of his pursuer's was set in deadly menace, in fierce lust of blood. Phaulcon knew why, with that lean tube flashing in the starlight, he was till spared; he knew, too, that once side by side in fair struggle, he would be hurled from his saddle, and crushed out under a just retribution, till all life was dead, as pitilessly as righteously as men crush out the snake whose fangs have bit them.

And the pursuit gained on him. Erceldoune rode him down, dashing through the wilderness of vegetation, with the surf of the sea thundering loudly below, and a loathing hate, a riotous joy seething through his veins. The horses ran almost neck by neck now, nothing between them and the billows lashing below but a span's breadth of rock and a frail fence of cactus. One effort more and he

would be beside him; the bloodshot eyes of the mare were blinded with the foam flung off the Monarch's curb, and his own arm was stretched to seize his assassin and hurl him out to the waters boiling beneath, or tread him down on the rock under his feet, while he wrung out his confession in the terror of death. He leaned from his saddle; his hand all but grasped his enemy in a hold Phaulcon could no more have shaken off than he could have loosened the grip of an eagle, or the fangs of a lion: he was even with him, and had run him to earth in that wild night race. Then—suddenly, with a swerve and a plunge as the spurs tore her reeking flanks—the mare was lifted to a mad leap, a wall of marble gleaming white in the starlight, and rising straight in face of the sea; she cleared it with a bound of agony, and the dull crash that smote the silence as she fell, told the price with which she paid that gallant effort of brute life.

His foe was lost.

A fierce oath broke from his lips and rang over the seas. As he put the Monarch at the leap, he reared and refused it; a second was already lost, an eternity in value to him whom he pursued. His face grew dark—all that was worst in him was

roused and at its height; he wheeled the hunter and rode him back, then turned again and put him full gallop at the barrier, nursing him for the leap; the marble wall rose before them, clothed with the foliage of fig and tamarisk trees; he lifted the horse in the air, cleared the structure, and came down on the yielding bed of wild geranium that broke the sheer descent.

On the ground lay the Barbary mare, panting and quivering on her side: the saddle was empty.

A darkness like the night came upon Erceldoune's face as he saw that his enemy had escaped him—a darkness closely and terribly like crime on his soul.

Wolf, and boar, and lion, he had chased them all to their lair, and brought them down, now and again, a thousand times over, by the surety of his shot, by the victory of his strength. His secret assassin, hunted and run to earth, at his mercy and given up to his will through the whole length of that race down the Bosphorus waters, had outstripped his speed, had baffled his vengeance, and was let loose again on the world with his name unconfessed, with his brute guilt unavenged, lost once more in the solitudes of the night, in the vastness of

the Ottoman empire. A second more, and his hand would have been at the throat of this man: he would have hurled under his feet the dainty silken beauty of the coward who was thief and murderer in one, and would have crushed the truth from his throat and the craven life from his limbs under the iron grind of his heel, giving back vengeance as great as his wrongs. A second more, and the traitor who had laughed with him in good fellowship in the Parisian café, and butchered him in cold blood in the Danubian solitudes, would have answered to him for that work. Now, the Barbary mare lay riderless at his feet, and before him, around him, stretching dim in the distance, were thickets of myrtle, labyrinths of cactus, dense groups of oleander, of palm, of pomegranate, where his quarry had headed for a known covert, or had found one by chance, and from which it was as hopeless to draw him again as to unearth a fox once outrun the hounds' scent, or pursue a stag that had once swam the loch.

A curse broke again from Erceldoune's lips, that the distant wail of the Imaum seemed to mock and fling back, as he rode the Monarch headlong down into the wilderness of shrubs and flowers, trampling the boughs asunder, crush-

ing luscious fruit and odorous blossom under the horse's hoofs, searching beneath the shadows and under the tangled aisles of foliage for the dastard who must be refuged there; one dusky glimpse of a crouching form, one flash of the starlight on a hidden face, and he would have fired on him now without a moment's check; his blood was up, his passions were let loose, and the Greek might as well have sought for leniency from the jaws of a panther as for mercy from Erceldoune then, had he ridden him down in his cover and dragged him out in the still Eastern night.

He rode furiously, hither and thither, through the thickest glades and where the shadows were deepest, searching for that to which he had no clue, in chase of a quarry which every turn he missed, every clump of shrubs he passed, every screen of aloes whose spines his horse refused to breast, might hide and shelter from his vengeance. Nothing met his eye or ear but the frightened birds that flew from their sleep among the piles of blossom, and the shrill hiss of the cicala, scared from its bed in the grasses. In the leafy recesses and the winding aisles of those hanging gardens overlooking the Bosphorus, a hundred men might have been secreted, and defied the search of one who was a stranger to the ground;

and he was cheated at every turn by the fantastic shadows of the moonlight and the palms. His foe had escaped him; before the dawn broke he might have slipped down to the shore and be far out at sea beyond the Dardanelles; or if the gardens were the known lair for which he had purposely headed in the race along the beach, he would be safe beyond pursuit wherever he made his den.

Erceldoune dropped the bridle on the chesnut's neck, and let him take his own pace; a terrible bitterness of baffled effort, of foiled wrath, was on him—a passion, like a weapon which recoils, and hits the one who holds it hard. This man's life had been in his hands, and had escaped him!—and the unexpiated vengeance rolled back on his own heart, fierce, heavy, dark, almost as though it were twin crime with what it had hitherto failed to punish. A night-assassin, only of the viler stamp because of the gentler breed, went through the world unbranded and unpunished, whilst honest men died by the score of cold and famine in the snows of Caucasus and the streets of cities! Erceldoune's teeth ground together; when they met again, he swore it should be for shorter shrive and deadlier work.

The Monarch, with his head drooped and the

steam reeking from his hot flanks, took his own course over the unknown ground, and turning out of the thickets, paced down a long winding aisle of cedars: the night was perfectly still, nothing was heard but the surging of the Bosphorus waters, nothing was stirring save the incessant motion of the fire-flies, that sparkled over all the boughs with starry points of light. Erceldoune had no knowledge where he was, except that the sea was still beside him, and he let his horse take his own way. Suddenly, through the dark masses of the cedars, a light gleamed, which came neither from the fire-flies nor from the moon, but from the Turkish lattice-work of a distant casement.

Was that where his foe had found covert? He raised the Monarch's drooping head with the curb, and urged him at a canter down the cedar-aisle, the noise of the hoofs muffled in the grass, that grew untrimmed, as though the wild luxuriance of the gardens had long been left untouched. Sultan's palace, Queen's serail, sacred Mosque, or Moslem harem, he swore to himself that he would break down its gates, with the menace of England, and have his murderer delivered up to him, though he were surrounded by an Emir's eunuchs, or harboured in the sanctuary of the Odá itself. For anything that he knew, the light might glitter from the

dwelling where his enemy and all his gang had made stronghold, or the place might swarm with Mussulmans, who would think there was no holier service to Allah than to smite down the life of a Frank, or the latticed window might be that of a seraglio, into whose anderūn it was death for a man and a Giaour to enter. But these memories never weighed with Erceldoune: he was armed, his blood was up, and if his foe were sheltered there, he vowed that all the might of Mahmoud, all the yataghans of Islam, should not serve to shield him.

A flight of steps ending the cedar-walk stopped the chesnut's passage: above ran a terrace, and on that terrace looked the few lattice casements allowed to a Turkish dwelling, whose light from within had caught his eyes. He threw himself out of saddle, passed the bridle over a bough, and went on foot up the stairs. Erceldoune's rifle was loaded; he had on him, too, the hunting-knife with which he had grallocked the hill deer; and he went straight on—into the den of the assassins, as he believed. Foolhardy he was not; but he had found sinew and coolness serve him too well in many an *avatar*, east and west, not to have learned to trust to them, and he had resolved, moreover, to go through with this thing cost what it might, bring what it would.

He hurried on the terrace, laden with the scarlet blossoms of the trumpet-flower and japonica, and heavy with odours from the nyctanthus and musk-roses trailing over the stone; a door stood open on to it, leading into the large court which forms the customary entrance of a Turkish house; he paused a moment and looked through; there was only a dim light thrown on its walls and floor, and there was no sound but of the falling of the water into the central fountain. He passed the threshold, and entered, the clang of his step resounding on the variegated mosaic of the pavement: its own echo was the only sound which answered—for its stillness the place might have been deserted. But the court opened into a chamber beyond, flooded with warm, mellow light, its dome-like ceiling wreathed with carved pomegranates, while another fountain was flinging its shower upward in the centre, and the fragrance of aloe-wood filled the air from where it burned, like incense, in a brazier;—a picture, full of oriental colouring. With his rifle in his hand, his white burnous flung behind him, and his single thought the longing which possessed him to unearth his foe, and have his hand upon his throat, he swept aside the purple draperies, that partially shadowed the portico, and passed within the entrance.

A woman rose from her couch in the distance, startled, yet with the look of one who disdains to give its reins to fear—as a sovereign would rise were her solitude desecrated;—and he paused, his steps arrested and his passions silenced, as in ancient days he who came to slay in the deadliness of wrath, uncovered his head, and dropped his unsheathed sword, entering the holy shrine at whose altar his foe had taken sanctuary. His enemy was forgotten;—he stood before Idalia.

He saw her in the flood of amber light that fell upon the lustre of her hair, on the white folds of her dress with its hem of gold, on the scarlet blossom of the roses clustering about her feet, on the aromatic mist of the aloe wood burning near;—and in an instant he had crossed the marble that severed them, his head uncovered, his hand disarmed, his eyes blinded.

"At last!—at last!"

And he had never known how strong had become the power, how eager had grown his quest, of the memory which had pursued him, until now, when he bowed before her, when his lips were on her hand, when a hot joy that he had never known swept through his life, when in that suddden meeting his gaze looked upward to the face which

had mocked him a thousand times, from the blue depths of sea waves, in the tawny stretch of eastern plains, in the stillness of starry nights and the darkness of convent aisles, and now at length was found.

She drew herself with haughty amazed anger from him :—she saw her solitude violated by the abrupt entrance of an armed man when the night was so late that the chant of the Imaum was calling to prayer: she saw a stranger, by his dress an Arab, bend before her in homage that was insult. She wrenched herself away, and signed him back with a gesture too grand in its grace for fear, and in her eyes a glance which spoke without words.

Then, as he raised his head, she saw the features which she had last beheld in what had seemed their death hour, while up to hers gazed the eyes that but for her succour the vulture's beak would have struck, and torn out for ever; then she knew him;—and over her proud loveliness came a sudden flush, a softness that changed it as by a miracle; and she looked down upon him with that glance which he had seen and remembered through the dizzy mists of delirium, and had given to his Madonna in the altar-picture at Monastica.

"*You!*"

It was but one word; but by that word he knew that as he had never forgot, so he had not been forgotten.

He bent lower yet, till his lips touched her hand again.

"At last! I thought that we should never meet! And now—I have no words. To strive to pay my debt were hopeless; God grant the day may come when I can show you how I hold it. You saved my life; you shall command it as you will."

His words broke from his heart's depths, and in the rapid breathless tide of emotion, strongly felt and hard to utter; few women would have failed to read in them that, with his bold, keen, dauntless nature, self-reliant, danger-tested though it was, there went a faith that would be loyal to his own utter ruin, once pledged and given, and a tenderness passionate and exhaustless, through which he might be lured on to any belief, dashed down to any destruction. A dangerous knowledge; there are scarce any women to be trusted with it.

Silence fell between them for the moment, where she stood beside the scarlet roses of the fountain, with the heavy aloes perfume rising round, and at her feet, bowed low before her, the man whose life was owed to her by so vast a debt—a stranger and un-

known, yet bound to her by the golden bonds of service that had loosed and freed him from his grave. All the glory of her beauty was deepened and softened as she looked on him, startled still, and hardly conscious of his words; and Erceldoune gazed upward to her face, with a dim mist before his sight, as he had never gazed before upon the face of woman:—he had forgotten all in that luminance of light, that glow of colour, that delicious dreamy fragrance.

Remembrance returned to him as she released her hands from his hold, and drew slightly from him. They could not meet as strangers, while betwixt them was the tie of a life restored, and the memory of that hour of awful peril in which she had been his saviour. But he had come, armed and alone, by violent entrance into her solitary chamber in the lateness of the night; and on her face was the look of one to whom insult was intolerable and all fear unknown—then he remembered what had brought him thither, and spoke ere she could speak.

"Pardon me for the rude abruptness with which I have broken on you; nothing can excuse it save the truth—I followed, as I thought, one of my Moldavian assassins; I hunted him down the Bos-

phorus, and lost his track in the gardens here. I fancied ——"

"Your assassins!—here!——"

"Doubtless it was an error of mine!" he broke in hastily; that this house could be his murderer's lair was impossible, since it was hers, and he forebore to tell her how closely he had hunted his quarry to her presence, lest he should give her alarm. "I rode him down into a wilderness of palm-trees and cactus, and missed his trail in the darkness;—the coward was unarmed, I could not fire on him, and he escaped me. I saw a light gleam through the cedars; and I forced my entrance; then I forgot all—even forgot what my own violence must appear—since it led me to you!"

His voice dropped and softened as he spoke the last word; the pitiless passion which had alone possessed him as he had dashed aside the draperies and forced his way into what he had believed the covert of the man he hunted, were outweighed and forgotten; even while he spoke he had no memory but for her.

She shuddered slightly, and glanced into the dim twilight gloom of the court on to which her chamber opened.

"If you tracked him into these gardens, he

may be there, or may have hidden here. Search; — have my people with you — let them take torches, and seek through the gardens. No one can have entered; but the grounds are a wilderness——"

"More likely he has escaped to the sea-shore; and all I know, or care now, is, that he has served to bring me—*here!* Oh! my God, if you knew how I have sought you!—and now that we have met, what can I say? Nothing that will not leave me deeper your debtor than before."

"Say no more. You owe me nothing. Who would not have done for you the little that I did?"

"You perilled your life to save mine, and mine is owed to you if a man's life was ever owed for angel work," broke in Erceldoune, while the force of a new and strange softness trembled through his voice as he stood alone in the stillness of the night with this woman, of whom he knew nothing—nothing, save that she filled his soul and his senses with a sweet fierce joy that had never touched them before, and that he had been rescued from his grave by her hand.

Over her face swept a look almost of pain:

"Call nothing *I* did by that name. And—why should you feel it as a debt, as a merit even? A

little cold water held to a stranger's lips! It is not worth a thought."

"It was worth my life, and with my life I will pay it, if you will take the payment, be it made in what guise it may."

They were no empty words of courteous requital; they were an oath to the death, if need be; she was silent, while her glance dwelt on him where he stood, reared now to his full stature, in the amber flood of the lamps, the snowy folds of the burnous flung back, and on his face a grandeur from the stormy passions an instant ago lashed to their height, blent with the eager light with which he looked on her. Then she held her hand out to him, with the beautiful impulse of a proud and gracious nature, touched and bending with a sovereign grace.

"I thank you for your words. There is no question of debt now; they more than pay the little I could do to serve you in your peril. We cannot meet as strangers; let us part as friends."

The words were even in their gentleness, a sign of dismissal. He had broken in on her abruptly, and the night was late. He bowed low over her hand—as we bow over that of an Empress.

"Part! True;—I come unbidden here; I have no right to linger in your presence; but we cannot

part until I know that we shall meet again. I have not found to night what I have sought so long unceasingly and hopelessly, only to-night once more to lose it."

She drew back slightly, and her face grew paler, while over its brilliance swept a troubled feverish shadow: she answered nothing.

"You can know nothing of me now, but at least you will consent to know more?" he pursued. "A name alone tells little; yet had I had one by which to seek the saviour of my life, it would not have been so long before you had heard mine."

In the hot night, in the perfumed stillness, in the sudden revulsion from the violence of vengeance to the wild sweetness of this woman's presence, words far different reeled through his thoughts and rose to his lips; but they were held back by his own sense of their madness, and by the dignity, nameless yet resistless, which surrounded her.

"You would know my name? It is Idalia Vassalis."

She uttered it almost with defiance, yet a defiance which had a profound sadness in it, like the defiance of the slave.

"And why conceal it so long? Can you not

think what it was to owe so great a gratitude to you, yet to be left in such strange ignorance of my preserver that, for anything which I could tell, we might never have met on earth?"

"I had reasons for desiring my own name untold," she answered, coldly, as though interrogation were unknown to her. "Besides I never thought that you would have any remembrance of me."

"To have lost remembrance I must have lost the life you rescued."

The brief words said a volume; she knew they were no offspring of hollow courtesy, but a passionate truth broken up unbidden from a character in which a bold and noble simplicity prevailed over all that the world had taught, in motive, in purpose, in action, and in speech; to understand *her*, might for years bewilder and mislead the man; to understand *him*, the few moments of that night sufficed to the woman.

"It is few remember as you do," she said, and the soft lingering richness of her voice, with an unspoken melancholy vibrating through it, thrilled through him. "Life is no great gift given back to merit gratitude! But, while we lose time in words, your murderer will escape; if you chased him to

these gardens, there is no outlet seaward. Take my people with you; some are Albanians, and will serve well and boldly under need; let the grounds be searched, for my safety if not for your own."

Whilst she spoke she rang a hand-bell; a negress obeyed the summons, an Abyssinian, clothed in scarlet and white.

"Bid Paulus and his sons take arms and torches, and wait without on the terrace," said the mistress to her slave, who gave the salaam silently, and left the chamber. "The men will be faithful to you," she resumed to Erceldoune. "Let them accompany you home; if your assassins be in Turkey, the Bosphorus shores cannot be safe for you alone. No:—you will not refuse me; you can set little store on the life you say I gave you back if you would risk it wantonly so soon."

"My life will be richer and dearer to me from to-night."

The words broke from him on impulse and almost unawares, as he bent before her in farewell: he could not linger after her dismissal; to have disputed it would have been impossible, for there was about her that nameless royalty which is its own defence, and which no man ever insulted with impunity, or insulted twice.

She avoided all notice of his words as she gave him her adieu, speaking, as she had hitherto done, in French.

He bowed over her hand, but he held it still.

"And to-morrow I may have permission to return, and seek to say all for which I have no words to-night? The debt that you disclaim must, at least, be sufficient bond between us for us not to part as strangers?"

Looking upward he saw a certain hesitation upon her face; her eyes were suddenly darkened by a shadow it were hard to describe, and she was silent. Chivalrous in his courtesy to women, pride was too strong in him for him to sue where he was repulsed, to entreat where he was undesired. He released her, and raised his head.

"It is not for me to force my presence on you. Farewell, then, and take, once for all, my gratitude for a debt that it has pleasured you to embitter."

The words were proud, but they were also pained; they were the terse, unstudied phrases of a man who was wounded, but who could not be lowered, and would not be angered; they served him better, and touched her more keenly, than more servile or more honeyed utterances would have done. She smiled

with a certain amusement, yet with a graver and a gentler feeling too.

"Nay—you need not read my silence so. Come here again—if you wish."

Just then the clang of the Albanians' arms announced their readiness on the terrace without; he bowed down once more before her, and left her standing there, with the clusters of the roses at her feet, and the colour of the rich chamber stretching away into dim distance around her as she had suddenly broken on his sight, when he had dashed back the purple draperies in pursuit of his assassin.

And he went out into the night with one thought alone upon him; he felt blind with the glow of the light, intoxicated with the incense odours, dizzy with all that lustre and maze of delicate hues, of golden arabesques, of gleaming marbles, and of scarlet blossoms; but what had blinded his sight and made his thoughts reel, was not these, but was the smile of the woman who had suddenly lit his life to a beauty which he had passed through half the years that are allotted to man, never having known or cared to know.

CHAPTER IX.

RITTER TANNHAUSER.

Of his foe there was no trace.

The Monarch stood undisturbed, with the bridle flung over the cedar bough, and the Barbary mare lay motionless, with her right fore leg twisted under her and broken; of his foe there was no trace, and he rode on silently down the Bosphorus shore back into Pera, with the Albanians running by his horse's side, their torches throwing a ruddy glare over the moonlit sea and silvered sands, and on their own picturesque dresses and handsome classic faces, as they held on to his stirrup-leather.

A few moments before, and he had had no thought save of the blood-thirst with which he had ridden his enemy down the shore, and of the just vengeance of an unpardonable wrong; now he had no memory save one.

With the morning he rose, with but this one

thought still—he would see her again! With the early dawn, while the sound of the drums was rolling through the mists, as they heralded the Commander of the Faithful going to prayer, he was plunging into the grey depths of the Bosphorus: sleep beyond his bidding. He knew that for hours yet he could not go to her, but he watched the sun in intolerable impatience for it to travel faster on its way; he walked alone to and fro the silent shore in a dream that was filled with her memory, and dead to all else. He did not pause to analyse what he felt, not even to wonder at it; his life was launched on the tempestuous sea of passion, and he lived in a trance of feverish intoxication, restless pain, and sweet idolatry. What avail how great had been his strength before? It only served to fling him down in more utter captivity now.

Far sooner than ceremony would have allowed him, he rode down the same path by which he had pursued the Greek the night before; but of him he had no more thought than if he were blotted from his life, when once more he looked upon her;—a woman fitted for a throne.

She did not give him her hand, but she smiled, that smile which gave its light to her eyes yet more

than to her lips; and he thought that she must hear the beating of his heart—it had never throbbed so thick and fast when he had given the word for his own death-shot in the Carpathian pass. He had never felt himself stricken strengthless and powerless, blind and dizzy with a thousand new emotions, as he felt now:—so had another bold Border chief, the Night Rider of the Marches, been conquered when Bothwell stood before his Queen.

His thoughts were full of fever, his life seemed confused yet transfigured. To have thrown himself at her feet and gazed there upward to her in silence and in worship, would have been to follow the impulse in him, She knew it; his eyes spoke all on which his lips were perforce dumb; he did not think how much they betrayed him, he did not dream how much they told—to a woman who had wakened so much love that its faintest sign was known to her — of the tumult in his heart, of the glory in his life, of the madness in his soul, which were so mingled and so nameless to himself.

In that moment, the whole heart of the man, in its brave truthfulness, its bold manhood, its head-long faith, and its awakening passions, was open

before her as a book;—she knew her power over a dauntless, loyal life: how would she use it?

She let her glance dwell on him for a moment, those lustrous changeful eyes, whose hue could never be told, calmly meeting the passion of his own: calmly reading and watching the type and the worth of this life, which through her was still amongst the living.

"Have you found no trace of your assassin?" she asked him carelessly. "They told me there were no signs of him on the shore last night."

"I forgot him! I have only remembered that he brought me here."

"It is not many who would follow so generous a code as yours. You have a deathless memory for gratitude, a forgiving oblivion of injury."

"Hush! do not give me credit that is not mine. As for gratitude—it is not *that* only which has made my life know no memory save the memory of you!"

His voice trembled, the words escaped him involuntarily: he was scarcely conscious what he said. She bowed with that dignity which repulsed without rebuking the meaning of the words.

"You do me far too much honour. The little I did in common human charity merits, as I said

before, neither thanks nor memory. You stay in Constantinople, I suppose?" she continued, with that ease which was almost cold—cold, at least, compared to the tumult of impassioned impulses, unconsidered thoughts, and newly-born emotions which were warm and eager in the heart of her listener. It checked him, it stung and chilled him.

"I am waiting for home despatches," he answered her; "I am a Queen's courier, as you may have heard. You are living here?"

"Only for a while; some months, a few days, I do not know which it may be. You, who are so splendid an artist, must find constant occupation in the East?"

"I? I am little of an artist, save when my horse or my rifle are out of reach. We, of the old Border, rarely carved our names in any other fashion than by the sword."

She saw how little his thoughts were with his words, as she met again the burning gaze of eyes that told far more than he knew; their language was too familiar to her to move her as it would have moved a woman less used to its utterance; it was a tale so old to her! She sighed, a little impatiently, a little wearily; she was unutterably tired of love. What was intoxication to him was but a thousand-

times-told story to her. And yet—she saw that this man would suffer, and she foresaw that he would suffer through her. She pitied him, as it was not in her commonly to pity.

"I saw you in Sicily, surely?" he pursued. "For one moment, as you passed in a lateen-boat?"

"I was in Sicily a year ago; I dare say you might have seen me."

"You travel much?"

"Who does not in our days?" she answered, with carelessness, but carelessness that veiled a refusal to speak further of herself, which was impenetrable. She had every grace of womanhood, but beneath these she had a haughty and courtly reticence that was impassable. "Travel has one great attraction—it leaves little room for reflection. You like it yourself?"

"Yes, I like it. A courier's suits me better than any life, except a soldier's, would have done. However, it was not with me a matter of preference; I was ruined; I was glad of any post."

He said it frankly, and with the indifference which his decayed fortunes really were to him; but he saw that she was rich, he heard that she was titled, and he would not form her friendship under false colours,

knowing that his own title gave him a semblance of wealth and of station he had not.

She smiled slightly, there were both wonder at his honesty, and comprehension of his motives in that smile; the candour and the integrity of his nature were very new to her, and moved her to a wonder almost kindred to reverence.

"You are rich, I think," she said, a little wearily. "You have strength, liberty, manhood, independence, honour;—how many have forfeited or never owned those birthrights! You chose very wisely to take a wanderer's freedom rather than the slavery of the world."

Erceldoune shook himself with a restless gesture, as an eagle chained shakes his wings:

"Ich diene nicht Vasallen!"

he muttered in his beard.

She laughed, but her gaze dwelt on him in sympathy with the fiery independence of his nature.

"Never the vassal of a slave? Then never be the slave of a woman!"

He looked at her, and there was something wistful in the look; he wondered if she knew her power over him, and if she made a jest of it; he could not answer her with that badinage, that gay light homage, that subtle flattery, to which she was accustomed;

he felt too earnestly, too deeply; a man of few words, save when keenly moved or much interested, he could not give himself to the utterance of those airy nothings, while all his life was stirred with passion he could not name.

At that moment the great Servian hound entered through the open window from the terrace, and stood looking at him with its wolf-crest up, its fine eyes watchful and menacing, and a low angry growl challenging him as a stranger. It was a magnificent brute, massive in build, lithe in limb, pure bred, and nearly as tall as a young deer.

Erceldoune turned to him and stretched out his hand.

"Ah! there is my gallant friend. I owe him a debt too."

The animal stood a second looking at him, then went and laid down like a lion couchant at her feet.

She laid her hand on his great head—a hand of exceeding fairness and elegance, with the sapphires and diamouds glittering there, which Mother Veronica had noted, with a recluse's quick appreciation of worldly things.

"You must forgive him if he be discourteous; he has so often been my only champion, that he is apt to be a little rash in his chivalry."

"I honour him for his fidelity. But, your only champion? Where was the chivalry of the world, to leave such a post to a dog?"

"Where! In idle vows and poets' dreams, I imagine; its only home in any time, most likely. The Ritter Tannhäuser swore his knightly homage in the Venusberg, but ere long he turned on her who gave him his delight:

> "O Venus schöne Fraue mein,
> Ihr seyd eine Teufelinne!"

The German legend is very typical!"

"Tannhäuser was a cur!" said Erceldoune, with an eloquent warmth in his voice rather than in his words. "What matter what she was—what matter whence she came—she was the sovereign of his life; she had given him love, and glory, and delight; she was *his*. It was enough—enough to lose a world for, and to hold it well lost!"

He paused suddenly in the passionate poetic impulse on which he spoke, which had broken up in his heart for the first time, utterly alien as he believed to his nature, to his temperament, to his will. It was of her and of himself that he thought, not of the old Teutonic Minnesinger's legend of Tännhauser: and the rich glow of the sunlight slanting across the mosaic pavement, shone in the

dark eagle lustre of his eyes, and lent its warmth to the Murillo-like bronze of his cheek.

She was a woman of the world; that noble truthfulness, that gallant faith, that knightly earnestness were new and very strange to her. They touched her.

"If Tannhäuser had loved like *that*—who knows? —even she, the Teufelinne, might have been redeemed. She could not have been faithless to such faith." she said, half musingly, rather following out her thoughts than addressing him; and in her voice there was a vague pathetic pain.

Mad words rose to his lips in reply—words that he had to hold down in silence; the room seemed dizzy round him, the odours of the flowers reeled in his brain as though they were narcotics; he watched, like a man half-blinded, her hand wander among the scarlet blossoms, and toy with the waters of the fountain. It was a delirium; and, for all its feverish pain, he would not have exchanged it to have back the happiest and most tranquil hour of his past. He had dreamed of her, till he had loved her, as utterly as ever a man loved a woman; he was in her presence—at last!—and all love that before might be but a dream became at once with giant growth a passion. She did not—with him at least

—seek her power; but such power was hers in its widest magnitude of empire; and she was a little weary of it, as sovereigns are weary of their crowns.

"You give fresh air the preference,—will you come into my gardens? They are very wild, but I like them the better for that," she asked him, as she rose with that half-languid grace which bespoke something of oriental blood in her, and, moved out on to the terrace.

The gardens were, in truth, untrimmed as the neglect of years could make them, but they had been originally palace grounds, and all the colour and luxuriance of unchecked vegetation made them beautiful, with their wilderness of myrtle, cactus, and pomegranate, and their stretches of untrained roses blooming round the splashing waters of the marble and porphyry fountains.

"Little has been done here for years, and yet there is a loveliness in them not to be had in trimmed and trained château gardens," she said, as she turned so that the sun fell full on her face with its delicate haughty lustre, its richness and fairness of hue.

"Yes! there *is* a loveliness," he answered her, as his eyes looked down into hers, "greater than I ever believed in before."

She laughed a little; slightly, carelessly.

"What enthusiasm. So great a traveller cannot, surely, find anything so new and striking in a wild Turkish garden?" she said, half amusedly, half languidly, a trifle ironically, purposely misapprehending his words.

The look came on him that had been there before, when she had bade him never to be the slave of a woman; proud, and yet wistful.

"I do not know that!" he said, almost bitterly: "but I know that the gardens may be as fatal as those of Uhland's Linden-tree. You remember how the poem begins?'

The words took an undue effect on her; resentment came on her face, inquiry into her eyes, that she turned full on him in some surprise, some anger, and yet more, as it seemed to him, disquiet. Then all these faded, and a profound sadness followed them.

"Yes, I remember," she said, calmly. "Take warning by Wolfdieterich, and do not lie under the linden! Rather, to speak more plainly, and less poetically, never come where you do not see where your footsteps will lead you. You know nothing of me, save my name; leave me without knowing more. It will be best, believe me—far best."

She paused as she spoke, as they moved down the avenue, the roses strewing the grass path, and the Bosphorus waves flashing through the boughs. The singularity of the words struck him less at that moment than the injunction they gave him to leave her. Leave her!—in the very moment when his quest had been recompensed; in the first hour when, at last in her presence, at last in her home, the fugitive glory of his dreams was made real, and he had found the woman who had literally been to him the angel of life.

Beneath the sun-bronze of his face she saw the blood come and go quickly and painfully; he paused, too, and stood facing her in the cedar aisle, with that gallant and dauntless manhood which lent its kingliness to him by nature.

"Best? For which of us?"

"For you."

"Then I must refuse to obey."

"Why? Refuse, because it is for yourself that I have spoken?"

"Yes. If my presence jeopardised you, I must obey, and rid you of it; if I alone be concerned, I refuse obedience, because I would give up all I have ever prized on earth—save honour—to be near what I have sought so long, and sought so vainly."

It was all but a declaration of love, to a woman of whom he knew nothing, save her beauty and her name. She read him as she would have read a book, but she did not show her knowledge.

"You are very rash," she said, softly, without a touch of irony now. "I have said truly, I have said wisely, it will be best for you that our friendship should not continue—should barely commence. If you persist in it, the time will, in every likelihood, come when you will condemn me, and reproach yourself for it. I speak in all sincerity, even though I do not give you my reasons. You consider—very generously—that you owe me a debt; it would be best paid by obeying what I say now, and forgetting me, as if we had never met."

She spoke with the courtly ease of a woman of the world, of a woman used to speak and to be obeyed, to guide and to be followed; but there was a certain inflection of regretful bitterness in her voice, a certain shadow of troubled weariness in her eyes, as if she did not send him from her without some reluctance. They were strange words; but she had known too many of the multiform phases of life to have any feminine fear of singularity or of its imputation, and had passed through unfamiliar

paths with a fearless careless grace wholly and solely her own.

His frank eyes met hers, and there was in them a passionate pain.

"You bid me pay my debt in the only coin I cannot command. Obey you, I will not. Forget you, I *could* not."

She smiled.

"Twenty-four hours' absence soon supplies any one with oblivion!"

"It is a year since I saw you in the Sicilian boat, yet I have not forgotten. I shall not while I have life."

His voice was very low; he was wounded, but he could not be offended or incensed—by her.

She bent her head with a sweet and gracious gesture of amends and of concession.

"True! Pardon me; I wronged you. Nevertheless, indeed rather *because*, you remember so well—I still say to you, Go, and let us remain as strangers!"

All that was noblest in her spoke in those words: all that lingered, best and truest, in her, prompted them. She wished, for his peace, that he should leave her, because she knew his heart better far than he himself; she wished—now, at the least—

that he whom she had rescued, should be spared from all shadow from her, from all love for her; she wished—now, at least—to save him. From what? From herself.

Yet it was not without pain on her side also, though that pain was concealed, that she spoke.

He looked at her steadily, the earnest, open, loyal, unartificial nature of the man striving in vain to read the motive and the meaning of the woman, and failing, as men mostly do.

His face grew very white under the warm brown left there by Asian and Algerian suns.

"If you command it, I must obey. My presence shall be no forced burden upon you. But you cannot command on me forgetfulness, and I could wish you had been merciful *before*, and left me to die where I lay."

Unconsidered, spoken from his heart, and the more profound in pathos for their brief simplicity, the words moved her deeply, so deeply, that tears, rarest sign of emotion with her that she had never known for years, rose in her eyes as they dwelt on him; her lips parted, but without speech; she stood silent.

The day was very still; sheltered by the cedars from the heat, the golden light quivered about

them; there was no sound but of the cicala among the pomegranate leaves, and of the waves breaking up against the marble palace stairs; neither ever forgot that single hour when on one word the future hung. His eyes watched her longingly; he did not ask who she was, whence she came, for what reason she thus bade him go from her; he only remembered the glory of her loveliness, and the words in which she had said, "Go, and let us remain henceforth as strangers."

"Answer me, Madame," he said, briefly, "Do you, for yourself, command me to leave you?"

"For myself? No. I cannot command you—it is only for your sake——"

She paused. What was, in truth, in her thoughts it would have been impossible to put in clear words before him; she could not tell this man that what she feared for him was the love that he would feel for herself; and what she had said sufficed to give back to his heart its restless tumult of vague joys, sufficed to make the present hour in which he lived full of sweet intoxication.

"Then, since not for yourself you command, for myself I refuse to obey; refuse, now and for ever—come what will—ever to be to you again as a stranger."

The tremor was still in his voice, but there were in it, too, the thrill of a triumphant gratitude, the reckless resolve of a tropic passion: she knew that the die was cast, that to send him from her now would serve but little to make her memory forgotten by him. She knew well enough that forgetfulness was a treasure for evermore beyond the reach of those who once had loved her.

"Be it so! We will have no more words on the matter," she said, carelessly, as she passed onward with a low, light laugh; her temperament was variable, and she did not care that he should see that new unwonted weakness which had made her eyes grow dim at the chivalry and pathos of his brief words. "The fantasies of Uhland have made us speak as poetically as themselves. My counsels were counsels of wisdom, but since Wolfdieterich will rest under the linden, he must accept the hazard! How calm the Bosphorus is, the waves are hardly curled. There is my boat at the foot of the stairs; it is not too warm yet for half an hour on the sea if you would like to take the oars."

A moment ago and she had forbade him any knowledge of her, and had sought to dismiss him from

her presence; now she spoke to him familiarly and without ceremony, with the charm of those first bright sweet hours of communion when strangers glide into friends; that hour which either, in friendship or in love, is as the bloom to the fruit, as the daybreak to the day, indefinable, magical, and fleeting.

The caïque rocked on the water, half hidden under the hanging boughs of myrtles at the landing-stairs, while the sea lay calm as a sun-girded lake, nothing in sight except a far-off fleet of olive-wood feluccas. And with one stroke of the oars among the fragrant water-weeds, the little curled gilded sea-toy floated softly and slowly down the still grey waters that glistened like a lake of silver in the sun. Erceldoune was in as ecstatic a dream as any opium-eater. She had cast away whatever thoughts had weighed on her when she had bade him leave her; a step once taken, a decision once given, she was not a woman to vacillate in further doubt or in after regret, she was at once too proud and too nonchalant. She had bidden him, in all sincerity, remain a stranger to her; he had refused to obey, and had chosen to linger in her presence. She let his will take its course, and accepted the present hour. The vessel dropped down the Bosphorus in

the sunlight, so smoothly, that a lazy stroke of the oars now and then sufficed to guide it along the shore, where the cypress and myrtle boughs drooped almost to the water, and the heavy odours of jessamine and roses floated to them from the gardens across the sea. Lying back among her cushions, so near him that he could feel the touch of her laces sweep across him as the breeze stirred them, and could see the breath of the wind steal among the chesnut masses of her hair that was drawn back in its own richness from her brow and fastened with gold threads scarce brighter than its own hue, the fascination of Idalia—a danger that men far colder and better on their guard than he, found themselves powerless against—gained its empire on him, as the spell of the Venusberg stole on the will and the senses of the mailed knight Tannhäuser. With a glittering gaiety when she would; with a knowledge of the world, varied, it seemed, almost beyond any woman's scope; with the acquisition of most languages and of their literature, polished and profound to scholarship; with a disdainful, graceful, ironic wit, delicate, but keenly barbed; and with all these a certain shadow of sadness, half scornful, half weary, that yet gave to her at times an exquisite gentleness and a deeper interest yet, she would have had a

fatal and resistless seduction, without that patrician grace of air and form, and that rarity of personal attractions, which made her one of those women whom no man looks on without homage, few men without passion. With the ease which long acquaintance with the world alone gives, she spoke on all topics, lightly, brilliantly, the languor or the satire of one moment changed the next to the poetry or the earnestness which seemed to lie full as much in her nature; and even while she spoke of trifles, she learnt every trait, every touch of his life, his character, his fortunes, and his tastes, though he never observed or dreamt of it—though he never noted in turn that in it all no word escaped her that could have told him who she was, whence she came, what her past had been, or what her present was. The frank, bold, loyal nature of the man loved and trusted, and had nothing to conceal. She, in penetration as keen as she was in tact most subtle, read his life at will, while her own was veiled.

The caïque dropped indolently down the shore, the oars scarcely parting the bright waters, the warmth of the day tempered by a low west wind, blowing gently from the Levantine isles, spice-laden with their odour. With the rise and fall of the

boat, with the perfumes of rose gardens borne on the air, with the boundless freedom of cloudless skies and stretching seas, there were blent the murmur of her voice, the fragrance of her hair, the glance, whose beauty had haunted him by night and day, the fascination of a loveliness passing that even of his remembrance. It seemed to him as if they had been together for ever, drifting through the glories of an Avillion—as if, until now in all his life, he had never lived. He was like a man in enchantment; the world seemed no longer real to him, but changed into a golden and tumultuous dream.

Time, custom, ceremonies, all grew vague and indifferent; it seemed to him as if he had loved this woman for an eternity. The passion suddenly woke in him would have broken its way into hot unconsidered words, but for that light chain lying on his love and binding it to silence which only gave it more tenacity and more strength. She would not have been what she was to him could he have approached her with familiarity; could he have sought her as his mistress, she would have fallen as his ideal.

No one could have called her cold who looked on the brilliance of her beauty, on the light of her

smile; but the languor with which she turned aside homage, and let words of softer meaning glide off her ear unnoted or unaccepted, gave her an impenetrability, a nonchalance, a serenity, that were as impassable as coldness.

"I may return to-morrow?" he asked her, when she at last had made him turn the caïque back, and had tacitly dismissed him.

He spoke briefly, but his voice was very low, and there was entreaty in the tone that pleaded far more than a honeyed phrase would ever have done with her. Her eyes dwelt on him a moment, once more with that profound and undefinable look of *pity*.

"Yes, since you wish. I shall be happy to see you at dinner, if you will do me the honour. Adieu!"

She bowed, and moved to leave him. Something in his look as he answered her made her pause as she swept away, and stirred by a sudden impulse (impulse was rare with her), she waited an instant and held out her hand.

He took it; and bending his head, touched it with his lips as reverently as a devotee would kiss his cross. She laughed a little as she drew it gently away.

"We are not in the days of Castilian courtesies! Farewell until to-morrow!"

And with that graceful negligent movement which gave her so languid a charm, she passed away from him into the villa; and for Erceldoune the sun died out of the heavens, and all its beauty faded off the bright earth about him.

He spent the remaining hours of the day alone—alone till long after nightfall—pushing a boat far out to sea, and letting it float at hazard, in the sunset, in the twilight, in the phosphor-brilliance of the moon, till the chant of the Muezzin rang over the waves with the dawn. His existence seemed dreamy, unreal, transfigured; he neither heeded how time went nor what he did; but lay leaning over the side of his boat gazing all through the night at the lighted lattices of her windows, where they glittered through the cypress and myrtle woods. He was in the first trance of a passion he had scorned.

CHAPTER X.

THE SOVEREIGN OF THE ROUND TABLE.

All the day Erceldoune spent aimlessly; he took his rifle and went over wild tracts of outlying country, he never asked or knew where, but he scarcely fired a shot; the hours seemed endless till they brought the evening, and he walked on and on through sear deserted valleys, and over hills thick clothed with the sombre cypress, with little object except to throw off the fever in him by exhausting exercise and bodily fatigue. The tumultuous happiness and the restless disquiet he felt were alike new to him; he was not a man easily to be the fool of his passions, or to let loose his judgment in their intoxication; he had held them down in almost as stern a curb as any of the iron knights of the Calatrava, and now, in solitude, and in the calmness of morning, he saw his own peril and his own madness as he had not in the enchantment of her presence, or in the impassioned phantasies of

the night. He loved her; he did not disguise it from himself; he was not likely to mislead either his own mind or others by the veil of a specious sophistry; and in the freshness and the abandonment of those first hours there came the chillier memory of the bidding she had given him, to leave her and remain a stranger to her. Fear or doubt were alike alien to him. Yet, in calmer reason, he could not but remember that such words must have their motive in some cause he could not fathom; that their mere expression had been strange, and argued of mystery, if not of evil. She had spoken nothing of herself; there remained still unexplained, unguessed at, the cause she had had for the concealment of her name at Monastica, or of her presence at all in those barbaric Moldavian wilds. Who was she? What was her history? He could not tell. Not even did he know whether she were wedded or unwedded; whether his love could ever bring him any chance of happiness through it, or whether it were already forbidden and doomed to be its own misery, its own curse. He knew nothing. And alone on the hill-side, with the vulture wheeling above-head in the noon skies, and the cypress thickets stretching downward to the precipice beneath his feet, a quick shudder ran through his

blood. Had he had the mastery of his life so long only to yield it up now to break in a woman's hands? Had he believed in and followed the ideal of his dreams only to suffer through her, and be divorced from her at the last?

He ground the butt of his rifle down into the loose black soil.

"It is too late now!" he said, unconsciously, aloud. "She saved my life; she shall claim it if she will. Come what may, I will believe in HER."

It was a loyal and gallant oath, pledged to the sunburnt solitudes and the blue cloudless skies. Was she for whose sake it was sworn worthy of it?

The world would have told him no, and, being questioned why, would have answered in three words:

"She is Idalia."

Anything of doubt, of depression, of pain, that had mingled with the tumult of his thoughts through the day, swept far away when the hour came for him to go to her again. One of the Albanian men-servants ushered him through the hall and into the magnificent chamber, which, once the Odà of an Anderūn, served now as the reception-room of the villa; the curtains were drawn back, the blaze of light dazzled his sight, and his eyes, eagerly glan-

cing through the vastness of the space for the Countess Vassalis, met instead the eyes of Victor Vane.

His first sensation was one of intense disappointment, the next of intolerable impatience, the third of reckless hatred. He did not pause to remember how improbable it had been to think that she would have invited him alone to dine at her table; how unreasonable it was to suppose that a titled woman of so much youth and so much brilliance could live in solitude the life of a recluse; how natural it must be that she was acquainted with a man of fashionable repute and aristocratic habits, who lived chiefly abroad, and knew almost every continental family of note; he remembered none of these things; he only realised his disappointment, he only saw before him the colourless face of the guest he had once entertained, and to whom he had felt that quick contemptuous dislike which a noted rider, an untiring sportsman, a desert-hunter, and a traveller impervious to fatigue, was certain to conceive for a delicate dilettante, an idle flâneur, a rusé silken speculator and courtier, such as Vane appeared to him.

Something in the very attitude of this man, moreover, as he leant against a marble console playing with a scarlet rose, and humming a Spanish Bolero

to himself, suggested the familiarity of custom, of intimacy; he looked like one in his own home—not less so from the way in which he advanced to Erceldoune with a cordial, pleasant smile of welcome. His smile was, indeed, always very sweet, and of a rarely winning promise.

"Ah, Sir Fulke!—charmed to renew our acquaintance. I was delighted to hear from the Countess that she expected the pleasure of seeing you this evening. I assure you I have never forgotten your most comforting hospitality on the moors; my only regret is that we have not come across each other before."

"You do me much honour, and have a long memory for a mere trifle."

Idalia had announced his acquaintance with her to Victor Vane: they had talked of him then! He could not—would not—have spoken *her* name to friend or stranger.

"The Countess tells me that you think you met about here one of your Moldavian assassins," pursued the other, not noticing, or not seeming to notice, the coldness with which his advances were met. "I am not surprised—so many rascals come eastwards. I hope you will be able to track the fellow?"

"My only regret is, that I did not shoot him down."

The answer was brief and stern. He could have shot down the man before him.

"Ah! great pity you didn't. Chivalry is wasted on these *condottieri;* I have seen too much of the scamps in Italy. That was a strange affair, that, in the Carpathians? Motive was political, I should suppose?"

"Probably. Politics is the hospital for broken scoundrels."

Vane laughed softly and merrily. He was a polished gentleman and a polished diplomatist, and never betrayed it if he were hit.

"True enough! *I* used to busy myself with politics once on a time; but, on my soul, I found myself in such bad company, that I was glad to throw up the cards, and leave the tables. Voilà! two of my best friends! Allow me the honour of introducing them to one who, before long, I hope, will let me claim him to make a trio! The Count Laraxa—Baron Falkenstiern—Sir Fulke Erceldoune."

Erceldoune looked at the two men—Hungarian and Thessalian. There was nothing of the adventurer or the *chevalier d'industrie,* however, about

either of them; they were of courtly breeding and of genuine rank.

"Idalia is not here?" said Laraka, after the introduction, to Victor Vane, who gave him the slightest possible silencing glance of warning as he answered:

"She will be, in a moment, I dare say."

Erceldoune crushed his heel into the softness of the carpet with a passionate oath suppressed. What was this man to her that he had title to call her by her familiar name?—what the other that he had a right to receive her guests, and speak of her actions? At that moment Diomed threw open the broad double doors. In the flood of sunshine still pouring in through the western windows there came Idalia.

She swept towards them with the dignity and grace of a woman long accustomed to homage wherever she moved, and familiar with it to weariness. She gave the same reception to all, without a shade of difference that could have flattered any, except that, when dinner was announced as served, with a slight bend of her head she signed Erceldoune to her, and laid her hand on his arm. She might have felt the quick tremor that ran through his frame at that signal of her preference, at that light touch of her hand: she

did see the gladness and gratitude that shone in his eyes as they gazed on her, and a sigh unconsciously escaped her—a sigh, not for herself but for him.

They passed into a large vaulted chamber, the walls of white marble, the draperies and couches of scarlet, the matting a silken amber tissue, the ceiling in fresco with wreaths of grapes and pomegranates raised in gold, and at one end a lofty fountain flinging its spray up among flowers.

"Who is that?" muttered Laraxa. "A magnificent man, and she seems to favour him. Is he—*prey?*"

"No. He is a beggared Queen's Messenger. Besides—don't you remember the name?—he was Count Conrad's Border Eagle. Take care what you say before him."

Laraxa lifted his eyebrows:

"Why, in Heaven's name, is he here?"

"Idalia's caprice! You remember, she saved his life; but take care—he may overhear."

"But if Conrad——"

"Conrad is at Athens by now. *Chut!*"

The table was round, so that there was no place of precedence except the right hand of the hostess. The dinner was of as much sumptuousness and

elegance as if it had been served in Paris; and the various Albanian, Negro, and Turkish attendants gave the entertainment an Arabian-like effect, heightened by the Eastern character of the confectionery and the Eastern fruits and flowers. The still lingering sunset glow was shut out, and the chamber was illumined with wax-lights in crystal or in candelabra at every point: everything about her spoke of no ordinary wealth, and had the air, moreover, of habitual luxury, even of habitual extravagance. It might be only surface deep; but that surface, at least, was brilliant.

"My table is round, like Arthur's," said Idalia, with a smile, as she sank into her chair. "There should be no precedence at a dinner-table: equality, at least, should exist over soups and entrées!"

"Where the Countess Vassalis is, can there fail to be a place of honour?"

She laughed softly:

"You would have me say, like the O'Donoghue, 'Where *I* am, is the head of the table.' That was a truer and haughtier pride than would have lain in a struggle for precedence. The answer always pleased me."

"And yet you are for equality, Madame?" said

Victor Vane, with a significance in the tone that did not lie in the words.

A certain contempt came into her eyes and a slight flush on her cheeks.

"My fancies, at least, remain patrician: a woman is never compelled to be consistent," she said, with a negligent indifference.

Yet no physiognomist who had studied the proud curve of her beautiful lips, or the firm mould of her delicate chin, would have said that inconsistency, or any need to take refuge in it, could ever be attributed to the Countess Vassalis, whatever other errors might lie at her score.

"What can that man be to her?" thought Erceldoune, while the dark colour flushed over his brow. Vane had not been named as any relative: there was no difference in her manner to him from her conduct to others, yet he had about him a nameless familiarity, graceful and polished like all his actions, which seemed to betoken in him either some sway over her or some accepted tie to her. Could he be her lover?—her husband? The blood grew like ice in Erceldoune's veins as the thought glanced across him. He felt dizzy, blinded, sick at heart, and drank down unconsciously the great goblet glass beside him

that they had filled with champagne. The wine that he was used to drink like water felt now like so much fire: the fever was in his life, not in the liquid.

The dinner was as choice and seductive a one as that with which the fair intriguing Queen of Arragon subdued the senses and stole the allegiance of Villeña. There was a shadow of melancholy still on their hostess; but the dazzling glitter of her wit gained rather than lost by that certain disdainful languor—half scorn, half weariness—which was more marked in her that evening than when she had been with Erceldoune alone in the sunny silence of the Bosphorus. A woman far less conscious of her power than she was conscious of it, would have known that all these men loved her, and were, even if unknown to them, each other's rivals. But the knowledge gave her no more sort of embarrassment than if they had been guests of her own sex. She was well used to all conquest; used to men in all their moods and all their passions; used to intoxicate them with a smile, to subdue them with a glance. She took little wine, touching each variety with her lips; but once or twice she drank a single draught of hot Chartreuse—a fiery liqueur that her sex rarely choose—and with it drove away

the shadow that seemed on her, and abandoned herself to the gay glitter of the hour. Watching her, he could have fancied, had not the thought been too fantastic, that she had taken the Chartreuse as men take hot wines—to shake off thought, and give their spirits recklessness. Yet what could this woman, with her splendour, her power, her youth, and her fascination, desire that she had not? What could be the canker at the core of that purple and odorous pomegranate flower of her life?

The various courses were served admirably; and he might have been dining at a palace for the lavishness of the banquet. There was great brilliance, too, in the conversation; for in her presence every one strove to shine. There was considerable freedom in the topics and in the wit—more than is customary in the presence of most women, though never actually sufficient to become licence; but now and then there were flashes of jest at which Erceldoune ground his teeth: they were a profanation to his ideal—a taint on his angel. Unconsciously he had so idealised and etherealised her in his thoughts, that a soil of earth on her would defame if it were too late to dethrone her. "That is not the tone in which men speak before a hostess they reverence," he said in his soul, with fiery bitterness, while he

glanced at her to see if she resented it. She lay back with her beautiful languor, laughing softly, slightly. She was either too familiar with it to note it, or if she felt resentment did not display it.

When only the Turkish and Levantine fruits and crystallised confections remained on the table in their silver baskets, which dainty statuettes of Odalisque slaves and Greek girls held up in a shower of flowers, hookahs were brought round by a Nubian to each of the guests.

"We have permission to smoke in your presence, then, madame?" said Erceldoune, as the porcelain narghilé was set beside him.

She looked up in slight surprise, as though the solicitation were new to her.

"Oh, yes! It is as necessary to you after dinner as your cup of coffee. Is it not?"

"It is always welcome—since you have the compassion to allow it," he answered her, as he raised the long amber-tipped tube.

She smiled.

"Of course—why not? That Latakia, I believe, is good? All the rest of it, they tell me, was bought up by the French Legation."

"It is excellent, full fragrance, but very soft. A-propos of the Chancelleries, at which of them shall

I have the honour of meeting you most? As yet, you know, I am in ignorance of your nation."

He spoke with the natural carelessness of so natural a question; the Countess Vassalis must as he deemed be known by the representatives of all the great Powers. A shadow of impatience came on her face, a defiant hauteur in her eyes.

"You will meet me at none of the Embassies," she said, briefly and coldly.

And in that moment Erceldoune saw Idalia as he had never seen her before; saw in her a certain grandeur of disdainful defiance, a certain outlawed sovereignty as of one life against a world.

"The Countess Idalia has come to the East for rest," interposed Victor Vane, with his musical, gliding voice. "How is it possible to obtain it if you go *en pénitence* to those tedious travesties of little courts, his Excellency's receptions? Visiting your Ambassador is, I think, one of the severest penalties of foreign residence."

"Our Representative will consent, I dare say, to release you from it if you petition him; or, most likely, he will not notice your choice *de briller par votre absence*," said Erceldoune, curtly.

He knew the explanation was a diplomatic lie; he was tortured with bitter impatience to know why the

man made himself her apologist, or had claim to explain her actions; his thoughts were in a conflict of conjecture as to the cause of her exclusion from the Embassies—for exclusion he believed it, by the look that for one instant he had seen upon her face.

The access of vivacity and abandon which a considerable amount of wine drunk, and the introduction of tobacco invariably produce, flowed into the conversation; its gaiety grew very gay, and though there was still nothing that was licentious, there was a tone in it not customary before women of rank; the anecdotes had a Bréda aroma, the epigrams had a Jockey Club flavour, the equivoques were fitted for a little gilded supper cabinet in the Maison Dorée; such a freedom in any other hour would have added to its piquance and its savour to Erceldoune as to all other men, but it now lashed him into vehement pain and incensement; it brought the breath of the world—and of a very profane world—on the woman of his dreams, it desecrated and almost dimmed the beauty of his ideal. Out of the mists of death he had once wakened to see her face in the haze of the sunlight; the face of an angel, the face of his altar-picture at Monastica: when he sat here in the perfume and lustre of the Eastern chamber, with the

odours of wines and flowers, and spices and incénse, with the glitter of gold and azure, of silver and scarlet, with light laughter and light wit on the air, he seemed to have lost her again—lost her more cruelly. Even while close beside him, the richness of her beauty, the glance of her eyes, the touch of her trailing dress, the gleam of the diamonds on her hair, heightened her loveliness and heightened his passion, till the night seemed full of wild tumult to him, of fierce delight, and of as fiery a pain, there was still on him that deadly nameless sense of some impending loss. She was nothing to him, worse than nothing, if she were not what he believed her. Alas, where was there ever man or woman who reached the spiritualised standard of an idealic love?

The lustre and splendour of the chamber, the artistic mingling of colour, the rich wines, the dreamy perfumes, the scented narcotics, these were all, he knew, the studied auxiliaries of a woman whose science was to beguile. But he dashed the accursed suspicion from him as quickly as it rose; he had sworn to believe in her, he *would* believe in her.

When she at last rose and left the dinner-table, her guests rose too, and followed her. A timepiece was striking twelve when they entered the salon.

"We have been long enough at dinner to satisfy

Brillat-Savarin!" said Idalia, glancing at it. "Do you like cards, Sir Fulke?"

"I think no man could say honestly he did not, though it is the most dangerous of pastimes," he answered her, with a smile. "I have seen its evils in South America, where, as in Pizarro's time, the old proverb still holds good, and they 'game away the sun before it rises.'"

"Many do that over other things than play, and before they know what their sun is worth!" she said, with that profound sadness which now and then chequered her careless brilliance with so dark a shadow. "We will have some baccarat, then. I am fond of play—when it is high enough."

"I should not have thought that."

She looked at him with a smile; she knew his reasons as well as though he had uttered them; there was something of irony, more of melancholy in the smile.

"No? But it is true all the same. Why should it not be? High play is excitement, and it whirls thought away."

"But *you* should have no thoughts that are pain."

"Those are idle words! There are few lives without pain, there are none without reproach."

She turned from him with something of impatience, and as her Albanians wheeled the card-table nearer, sank into her couch, drawing some cards to her. She looked a woman to lean over a balcony in a starlit Southern night, and listen to a poet's cancion, or a lover's whisper stealing up through the murmurs of the leaves with the reverent worship of Petrarca; not one to need the feverish excitation of the gamester's reckless hazards. Who was she? what was she? this mystery whom men called Idalia? he wondered] ceaselessly in eager unrest.

The baccarat commenced.

She played with the skill of her country, if that country were Greece, as her name implied; played like one accustomed to control chance by proficiency: but also with that alternate listlessness and eagerness which marks those who seek it as a distraction from those who crave it out of avarice. It was its excitement that was grateful to her, the rapid changes and chances. When she lost, she lost with an absolute indifference, and she staked her gold with a lavish extravagance that seemed to disdain speculation. Once or twice Erceldoune almost thought that she sought to guide the success of the hazard towards himself; if so, she succeeded;

he won considerably, to his own displeasure, and she did not. Over and over again, when the current of chance ran for her, she lost it, either listlessly, with that careless scornful weariness peculiar to her, or with a recklessness that made her throw large sums away while she laughed over a bon-mot. Two hours passed rapidly in the whirl of the game, leaving him winner of some heavy sums. Her eyes rested on him a moment, on the dark soldier-like grandeur of his head, which the rich colours and light of the room behind him threw up, as a noble Spanish head by Murillo might be thrown up on an illuminated background of gold and scarlet; then, at a slight pause in the game, she rose, sweeping her laces about her.

"Play on by yourselves, mes amis, as long as you will. I am constant to nothing—the privilege of a woman!—and I shall take a cup of coffee."

They all rose, as of course she knew that they would, and gathered about her, while two Nubians brought round trays of Mocha and bonbons. It had been her caprice that Erceldoune should be a gainer by the baccarat, and she had secured her point without any semblance of effort. The expression used by more than one to her concerning him, had impressed her with the idea that

his necessities for money were far greater than they were.

Taking their coffee, they stood about her by the marble basin of the fountain. As the night grew late, as the wine and the incense and her constant presence added heat to their mutual rivalry, the bands of courtesy began to loosen, the instinctive jealousy that was rife among them began to seethe up in covert words and bitter ironies. Ercel-doune resented their presence, they resented his; even the bright soft harmony always characteristic of Victor Vane began to show a gleam of constraint and impatience beneath it. Any watcher might have seen that it needed but very slight provocation, a very little more licence, to remove the curb that lay on them, and to let their enmity break into feud, mere strangers though they were to one another. She saw this, but it excited in her no passing agitation even, no thought of difficulty; she was used to see the strongest tempests at riot, and to control them, if she cared to do so, with a glance or a word; often she let them destroy themselves by their own violence. Now she left them and ran her hands over the keys of the grand piano which stood near the fountain, and with hardly a chord of prelude sang a rich Romaic ode,

a mountain song with the old war-fire of Hellas in it. Her voice was of an exquisite beauty, highly cultivated and eloquent as any Pasta's, and it rang through the silence, throbbing on the air, and echoing far out to the night, where it was answered by the beating of the waves and the music of the nightingales among the roses. Those round her were stilled as by a sudden spell. She sang on, scarcely pausing, grand, mournful, impassioned chants, now Romaic, now Sicilian, now Venetian; songs of the nations, of the poets, of the hours of freedom, of the glories that were gone from Hellas and from Rome; songs of a profound pathos, of an eternal meaning. Neither Mozart nor Beethoven ever gave richer melodies than were those poems brought from the past, from the peoples, from the heart of dying nations, and from the treasures of their perished liberties.

Erceldoune leant against the white shaft of the marble walls, with his head bent; music always had power over him, and it gave her back all the divinity of his dreams, all the power of his lost ideal. Never, since the first moment when she had stooped to him with that one word "You!" had he seen her look as she looked now; those were the eyes that had bent above him with an angel's pity, when he had

lain dying in the sunlight. Anything of her empire that had been hazarded in the past few hours she recovered tenfold; anything of abhorrent doubt that had stolen into his loyalty and faith to her, was swept away and forgotten.

He believed in her—he worshipped her! Not less so, when with a shock of surprise, and all the Border-blood warming in him, he heard her sing the Scottish sonnet, beautiful and living still as the waters of the Esk, by which it was written:

Sleep, silence' child, sweet father of soft rest,
Prince, whose approach peace to all mortals brings,
Indifferent host to shepherds and to kings,
Sole comforter of minds that are opprest,
Lo! by thy charming rod all breathing things
Lie slumbering with forgetfulness possest.

The words, only the sweeter for the lingering softness of the foreign accent, came to his ear like the breath of his mountain air over the heather; as they died off the air he leaned eagerly forward:

"You know our poems? You believe that beauty may come even out of our rugged glens?"

"Surely every one knows Drummond? The gentle Cavalier who died of his Master's death? You must often have seen Hawthornden, I suppose?"

"It was my favourite haunt in my boyhood, though I believe I thought more of the birds I shot in the glen, and the water-fowls of the Esk, than of Drummond himself at that time."

"And yet there was *Patria* in every line of your face when you heard his sonnet just now," she said, with a smile.

"Ah! you know that Pope says,

'A Scot would fight for "Christ's Kirk o' the Green."'

To hear any of the old ballads is like hearing a trumpet-call; besides—Drummond's words on *your* lips! I cannot tell you what they were to me."

He paused abruptly, the silence more eloquent than any words could have been.

"You have never heard me speak English," she said, carelessly. "In truth, if you will pardon me, it is the language I like least. Its low Dutch, with all the exotic additions that have grown on it, is too hard for my lips; and I have rarely had occasion to use what knowledge I possess of it. Apropos of Scottish poetry, are you descended from the Rhymer?"

"We believe him to have been of the same race; but what is known of him is so enveloped in legend, that it is hard to trace. Thomas himself has grown

almost mythical, though 'Syr Tristam' is immortal."

"Yes! because Syr Tristam's folly is repeated by all men, through all ages."

"Folly? It merits a better name; it was, at least, fidelity?"

"Folly! Fidelity! They are synonyms for love. *L'un vaut l'autre.*"

"Would you never, then, believe in passion as enduring as Tristam's?"

"For Ysonde, who is another man's wife? Oh yes! that is a very common feature. The love is so charming because it is forbidden!"

The evening was very still; the stars shining in myriads above the cypress and ilex woods, the heavy odours of roses and basilica on the air, and through the boughs of the cedars silvery gleams and flashes of the phosphorescent water. She left her seat as she spoke, and went out on to the terrace, and leaned a moment over the marble wall.

"How cool, how tranquil! And we spend such a night over hot wines, and idle jests, and feverish play!"

To his heart, to his lips, rose words in unison with that sweetness of the night, born from the intoxication of the hour: as though she felt them

ere they were uttered, and would have them remain unspoken, she leant slightly towards him.

"Go home by yourself—with none of them, if they invite you. I don't mean," she added, with a laugh, "because they will knock you down to steal your winnings! They are not so low as that—yet."

The whisper was low and very rapid; surprise was the dominant feeling that it awoke in him, joined with something of a vivid wondering delight—she thought of his welfare!

"Your wish is my law," he answered her. "Do with my life what you will—it is yours."

"No. Not mine. It is a noble trust; never give it rashly."

There was a step beside them.

"A beautiful night, indeed," said Victor Vane. "A picture of Gherardo, and a poem of Hafiz! Certainly we never know what stars are till we come to the East."

"Never," said Idalia, turning to him; "and now you may return to Stamboul by their light. After their poetry come their practical uses. I shall dismiss you all now; I am tired. Good night!"

Lightly as the words were spoken, eagerly as they longed to dispute the dismissal, unscrupulous,

at least, as were some of those about her, all were constrained to obey her command—all were powerless to remain in her presence. Erceldoune was the first to accept her dismissal; he would not offer her even so much insult as would have laid in hesitation, and he took his farewell of her instantly and almost in silence.

Vane followed him with his glance.

"Why have you taken to patronise that Border moss-trooper, madame?" he asked, with a slight satirical laugh. "He is nothing but a courier, and has only an owl's roost at home that foxes burrow in, and cobwebs keep furnished. He is a rough rider and a wild shikari, nothing else; they are odd titles to your preference."

She looked him steadily in the eyes:

"He is a frank and gallant gentleman; that is, perhaps, as strange a one! It may be odd that *I* should care to see an honest man by way of variety; but—since it is my caprice, harm him at your peril."

Her guests were gone.

In solitude she sank down in the depths of a couch, with the light still playing on the diamonds in her hair, and her eyes watching the

fall of the showering spray into the basin of the fountain, where scarlet roses swayed into the lily-laden waters. She gave a weary, restless sigh as she thrust back the bright masses of her hair farther from her temples, and, leaning her cheek on her hand, gazed absently into the glancing surface. There was something of release, something of regret, something of self-reproach in her attitude and in her thoughts; though these were checked by and mingled with a careless ironic triumph, and a royal habit of command and of disdain.

"Have I done more wrong?" she said, half aloud, while her proud head fell. "Greater wrong than ever! He is loyal and lion-hearted—a brave chivalrous gentleman: he should not come amongst *us!* The others can play at diamond cut diamond; the others are fairly armed, and have but their weapons turned against them. But he is of different mould: he will suffer—he will suffer terribly!"

CHAPTER XI.

FAIRY-GOLD.

In the full noon heat of the next day—heat that brooded on the hills and glistened on the sea, in which the leaves and the flowers drooped, and the sails of the feluccas hung stirless—Idalia moved slowly and thoughtfully up and down her reception-room, the sunlight straying in chequered rays through the chinks of the shutters, and falling fitfully across her. The wolf-hound followed her step for step; there was not a sound except the falling of the fountains and the buzzing of a little humming-bird tangled among the flowers. There was a certain shadow on her, but it was not that of grief, still less was it that of any tremulous effeminate sorrow; it was haughty, unrestful, with much of doubt, much of rebellion, much of disdain in it—the shadow that was on the Reine Blanche in the fetters of Fotheringay, on Marie Antoinette in the presence of Mirabeau. There was an intense scorn in the dark

soft lustre of her eyes—the eyes of a Georgian or a Greek. She was netted closely in, in a net of partially her own past weaving: self-reproach was not the least keen of many regrets that were heavy upon her, and the world was against her; but she was not vanquished nor intimidated.

She came and paused before an open cabinet, on whose writing-stand lay a pile of letters. Her eyes rested on the one that lay uppermost, and read its lines for the second time with disdain, revulsion, pity, impatience, and loathing all mingled in her glance.

"He always wants money! He would give his soul for money; and yet he throws it away as idly as the winds!" she thought, while her hand absently caressed the great head of the hound. "Well! he can have it. I will always give him that. I would give it him all—down to the very diamonds—if he would leave me free, if he would cut away every link of the past, if he would go and never let me see his face again."

Yet still, though there was much of profound dejection and heart-sickness at her life upon her, there was no fear in it, and no sadness that had not as much disdain. She laid both hands on the dog's broad forehead, and looked down into his eyes.

"Oh, Sulla! when one life is chosen, is there no escape into another? If we accept error in blindness once, is there no laying it down? Plutarch has written, 'When we see the dishonour of a thing, then is it time to renounce it.' But what can we do if we cannot—if it stay with us, and will not forsake us? How can *I* be free from it?"

But bondage was not submission; and she was like the Palmyran or Icenian queens—made a slave, but all a sovereign still.

A humming-bird flew against her, and, frightened, tangled itself among her lace. She put her hand over it, and caught it, stroked smooth the little ruffled wings, laid her lips gently on its bright head, and, opening one of the lattices, loosed it, and let it fly into the sunny air.

"Liberty! Liberty! It is worth any sacrifice," she said, half aloud, as she watched the bird's flight through the gardens and outward to the sea.

At that moment a Nubian slave threw open the broad double doors of jasper at the end of the chamber, the hangings before it were flung aside, and Erceldoune entered her presence.

She had said it would be best that he should remain absent; yet he was not in error when he thought that the smile she had given him last night

was scarcely so sweet as that she gave him now. He seemed half her own by title of that death-hour in which she had felt for the faint beatings of his heart, and had watched beside him in the loneliness of the Carpathians. She could not forget that this man's strong life would have perished but for her.

He owed her a debt—the debt of faith, at the least. Whatever she might be to others, to him she had been as the angel of life. Moreover, there was in Idalia, overlying the proud earnestness that was in her nature, a certain nonchalance—a certain languid carelessness—that made her look little beyond the present hour, and change her temperament as immediate influences prevailed. The tradition of birth gave her some blood of the Commneni in her veins; and the *insouciance* of an epicurean, with the haughty power of imperial pride, were blent in her as they had been in Manuel. Therefore, since he had chosen to put aside her first warning, she allowed him now to come as he would.

As for him, life was a paradise—a delirium; and he gave himself up to it. The earth had eternal summer for him, and wore an eternal smile. He sat near her in the shaded light and sweet incense of the chamber, while they spoke of things that

served to veil the thoughts burning beneath his commonest words; they strolled through the cedar aisles, and through the fields of roses, as the heat of the day faded, and the breeze began to stir among the splendours of the flower-wilderness; they passed the sunset hour on the sea, watching the day die out in glory, and the fire from the west glow over the Marmora waves, and tinge the distant snow-crests of Mount Ida and Olympus.

When the little caïque floated slowly homeward down the waters, the evening star—the star of Astarte—had risen. Through the opened windows of her villa the lights of the banqueting-room glittered, and the table stood ready served, with the Albanians and Nubians waiting about it. She bade him stay, if he would, and he was her only guest. Had her wines been opium-drugged, they could not have brought him dreams more fatally fair—a lulled delight more sure to wake in bitterness—than they gave him now. The charms for every sense, the beauty of the chamber, the odours of the flowers, the oriental languor pervading the very air—all that he had felt the night before he felt tenfold now: then a passionate jealousy, a restless doubt, had haunted him; now he was alone, and on him only did her smile glance, did her eyes fall.

There was on her this night an infinite gentleness, a gracious sweetness, often tinged with sadness, though often bright, brilliant, and illumined with all the grace of talent. But at the same time there was the sovereignty which, in her solitude, guarded her as an empress is guarded in a Court, which made her as secure from words of warmer tinge than what she chose to hear, as she was carelessly disdainful of the precise customs of the world. He felt that she forbade him to approach her with any whisper of love; he knew that to take advantage of his admission to her solitude, to give any utterance to the passion in him, would be to be banished from it then and for ever. He felt this though she never spoke, never hinted it; and even while the restriction galled and stung him most, he most revered her for it, he most honoured and adored in her the holiness of his ideal.

There was a difference in her from the evening before; while her gaiety was less, the darker shadow was also far less upon her. She had scarcely touched the wines, and of play she did not speak; it might be but the "hope which out of its own self creates the thing it longs for," but he could have believed that for the few hours of the present she had resigned herself to happiness—happiness in

his presence. The thought seemed wild to him, baseless and vain even to madness; he told himself that it was a presumptuous folly, and he felt that her gentleness to him, her smile upon him, were only such feeling as a woman might well testify, in mere pity's sake, to one whom she had found in deadly peril, and whom she had restored to life on the very brink of the grave. And, indeed, there was a weary, royal grace always in her, which would have made a man, far vainer than Erceldoune could ever become, long doubt his own power ever to move her heart.

He asked nothing, heeded nothing, doubted nothing. He moved, acted, spoke, almost as mechanically as one in the unconsciousness of fever. It was love of which men have died before now; not of broken hearts, as poets say, but of its intoxication and its reaction, as in a death-draught of opium or digitalis.

She divined well enough all that was unuttered on his lips. She let his idolatry be fostered by all of scene, time, place, and the spells of her own loveliness that a studied coquette could have devised, yet she repressed any expression of that worship as a woman of the world alone can do, without any word that was cold, any glance

that was rebuke, yet proudly, distinctly, and beyond resistance.

She followed the impulse, the caprice perhaps, of the moment, without definite purpose or thought at all. For the last eight years men had never approached her save to love; it was a thousand-time told tale to her. If her heart had lost its freshness, or its pity, there could be little marvel in it, even though there were much blame.

The chant of the Imaum rang up from the shore, deep and sonorous, calling on the Faithful to prayer, an hour before midnight. She listened dreamily to the echoes that seemed to linger among the dark foliage.

"I like those national calls to prayer," she said, as she leaned over the parapet, while the fire-flies glittered among the mass of leaves as the diamond sprays glistened in her hair. "The Ave Maria, the Vespers, the Imaum's chant; the salutation of the dawn or of the night, the hymn before sleep, or before the sun;—you have none of those in your chill islands? You have only weary rituals, and stuccoed churches, where the 'Pharisees for a pretence make long prayers!' As if *that* was not the best—the only—temple!"

She glanced upward at the star-studded sky, and

on her face was that graver and gentler look which had come there when she sang.

"I have held it so many a time," he answered her, "lying awake at night among the long grass of the Andes, or under the palms of the desert. It was a strange delusion to build shrines to the honour of God while there are still his own—the forests and the mountains. But do not call my country cold; we are not cold; there are bold lives among us; and we can love—too well for our own peace."

His voice had a rich melody in it, and was unsteady over the last words; in his eyes, as they burned in the shadows of the night, she saw a passion as intense as ever glowed under the suns of Asia, the stronger for the rein in which it was still held.

She was silent a moment, then she laughed a little; very softly.

"Do not repudiate coldness; it is the most precious gift the fates give, if it be not the most poetic. Remember what your namesake of Erceldoune found when the Elf-Queen granted him his prayer; where he thought he held an angel he saw a loathsome shadow. The legend covers a wise warning."

"Ay!—but even while the horror of the shadow and the treachery were on him he had faith in *her*;

and his faith was justified; it gave him, in reward, his bright, immortal love."

She turned her head and looked at him, gently, pityingly, almost tenderly.

"Ah! you are too loyal for this world, far too loyal to spend your heart on any woman's love. It is only fairy gold, believe me, which, if you took it, would turn to ashes in your hand. And now,—a safe ride homeward to you, and good night."

She held her hand out to him with a sweet and gracious gesture, the more marked in her because she never gave her hand in familiar salutation; he bent over it, and touched it with his lips, a lingering kiss in which all his silenced heart spent itself.

She did not rebuke him; she had not power to speak coldly or chidingly to the man whose life was owed her, whose head had rested in his dying hour on her bosom. As he rode slowly out down the cedar avenue that passed in front of the terrace he looked up; she was leaning still over the marble parapet, her form distinct against the dark masses of myrtle foliage, the brilliance of the moonlight shining full upon her from the sea. She gave him a farewell sign of her hand as he bowed to his saddle, such as from her palace-prison Queen Ysonde might have given to her lover; and Ercel-

donne went on through the fragrant night, his horse's feet beating out rich odours from the trailing leaves, dizzy with that riot of hope, joy, belief, and desire, which is too tumultuous and impatient for happiness, but yet *is* happy beyond all that the world holds. She remained long in her solitude upon the terrace, gazing down into the shelving slopes of leaf and blossom, where the fire-flies made the woodland as star-studded as the skies.

"It is too late now—he would never forget *now*," she murmured. "I tried to save him, and he would not be saved!"

Saved from what? Saved from her.

A little while before, and in her own gardens at Naples, a brave boy, in the brightness of his youth, had been run through the heart in a rapier duel for her sake; and she had not felt a tithe so much pain as lay on her now, so much weary, passionate, and vain regret. Then many had called her heartless, and the mother of the dead boy had cursed her with pitiless curses; none would have called her heartless now.

For seven or eight days time came and passed away, spent thus. He sought her in the warm amber noons, stayed with her amidst the wilderness of roses, and drifted with her down the sunny sea

along the Bosphorus shore, and left her only when the midnight stars rose over the minarets of the city of Constantine. He met no one in her Turkish villa, and she let him come in this familiar unbroken intercourse as though it were welcome to her; as though, indeed, their friendship had been the long-accustomed growth of years. He asked nothing, heeded nothing; he never paused to recal that there was any defiance of custom in the intercourse between them, or to note that she, with her wealth and her splendour, was as utterly alone as though she were a recluse of Mount Athos; he never observed that she kept silence on all that could have explained her presence in Moldavia, or given him account of the position and the character of her life; he never noticed, he never recollected;—he was lost in a day-dream of such magic that it lulled him to oblivion of everything save itself, and all criticism, all reason, all doubt, were as impossible in him as insult and outrage to her. His own nature was one too boldly free, too accustomed to the liberty of both action and thought, too little tolerant of the ceremonials and conventionalities of the world, to be awake to the singularity of her reception of him as others might have been. Moreover, while she allowed him this unrestrained communion with her,

he would have been a vainer man far than Erceldoune who could have flattered himself that this was done because her heart was touched; or who should have brought on him his exile for ever by warmer entreaties for a softer joy than friendship. While untrammeled by any of the bonds of conventionality, while accustomed to a liberty of thought, of speech, of act that brooked no dictator, while distinguished by a careless negligence of custom and of opinion that was patrician even whilst it was bohemian, Idalia still kept the light but inexorable rein upon his passion, which forbade him to pass the bounds that she tacitly prescribed to him. He was a bold and daring man enough; in his early days he had been steeped in vice, though he had learned to loathe it; he was impassioned in his pursuit of her as any lover that the Asian suns had ever nurtured to their own heat. But he loved her as William Craven loved the Winter Queen, as George Douglas the White Queen.

One who should not have cared for her—if such there could have been—would have found an infinite variety, an endless charm in her companionship. She had travelled in most countries, she was familiar with most nations, she had knowledge of the classic and the oriental literatures, deep to a scholar's scope

and warmed with the picturesque hue of an imagination naturally luxuriant, though the world had joined with it an ironic and contemptuous scepticism that gave the keenness of wit, side by side with the colour of a poet, to her thoughts and to her words; she understood men pitilessly, human nature unerringly, none could have palmed off on her a false mask or a glossed action; she had seen and known the world in all its intricacies; the variety of her acquirements was scarcely so singular as the variety of her experience; and the swift change of her mood, now grave to melancholy, now careless to caprice, now thoughtful with a profound and philosophic insight into the labyrinths of human life, now gay with the nonchalant and glittering gaiety of bohemian levity, gave her much of inconstancy, it is true, but gave her infinitely more of charm and enchantment.

Evening fell once more, closing in the eighth day that their intercourse had thus passed on since the night when he had found her as he had hunted the Greek to his death; they had lingered without moving in the banqueting-room; the wines, and flowers, and fruits still standing on the table; no light stronger than the clear vivid moonlight shining on the freshly-cut flowers that strewed the ground,

"The Roman Emperors!" she repeated. "When the name was a travesty, an ignominy, a reproach! When Barbarians thronged the Forum, and the representative of Galilee fishermen claimed power in the Capitol! Yes; I descend—they say—from the Commneni; but I am far prouder that, on the other hand, I come from pure Athenians. I belong to two buried worlds. But the stone throne of the Areopagus was greater than the gold one of Manuel."

"You are the daughter of Emperors? you are worthy an empire."

His were the words of no flattery of the hour, but of a homage as idolatrous as was ever offered in the fair shadows of the Sacred Groves of Antioch to the goddess from whom she took her name. And there was a great pang at his heart as he spoke them; he thought of the only thing on earth he called his own, those crumbling ruins to the far westward, by the Cheviot range, where the scarlet creepers hid the jagged rents in the walls, and owls roosted where princes once had banqueted.

"An empire! *I* thought so once," she answered, with a low, slight laugh. "I had dreams—of the sceptre of my ancestors, of the crown of the Violet City, of an Utopia here, where east and west meet one

another, and nature would give us a paradise if men did not make us a hell. Dreams—dreams—youth is all a dream, and life too, some metaphysicians say. Where shall we wake, I wonder, and how—for the better? It is to be hoped so, if we ever wake at all, which is more than doubtful!"

There was an accent of sadness in the opening words, but the rest were spoken with that irony which, while it was never bitter, was more contemptuous than bitterness in its half languid levity. He looked at her with a vague and troubled pain—there was so much in the complexity of her nature that was veiled from him; seeing her life but dimly, there was so much of splendour, so much of melancholy in it, that exiled him from her, and that oppressed him; the more magnificent her lineage or her fortunes, the farther she was from him.

"You have one empire already," he said, almost abruptly, in the tumult of the suppressed thoughts in him—"a wider one than the Byzantine! You can do what you will with men's lives. I have nothing, I can lose nothing, except the life you gave me back; but if I had all the kingdoms of the earth I would throw them away for——"

The eagerness in his voice dropped suddenly, leaving the words unfinished; he crushed them into

silence with a fierce effort. She glanced at him with that graceful negligence with which she silenced all she would not hear.

"No kingdom would be a tithe so peaceful as your manhood and your honour. Never peril *those* for any woman; there is not one worth the loss."

The flash of a giddy, exultant, incredulous rapture ran like lightning through his veins for a moment. She had softly repulsed, but she had not rebuked him; she had known at what his words paused, and the smile she had given him had a light in it that was almost tenderness. He did not ask, he did not think, where his hope began or ended; he did not weigh its meaning, he dared not have drawn it to the light, lest close seen it should have faded; he only felt—

> So my eyes hold her! What is worth
> The best of heaven, the best of earth?

"There it lies!" she pursued, dreamily, resting her eyes on the distant minarets and roofs of Constantinople, rising clear and dark in the lustre of the moon, undimmed by even a floating cloud. "And all its glories are dead. The Porphyry-chamber and the Tyrian dyes, the Pandects and the Labarum, the thunder of Chrysostom and the violets of child-Protus—they could not make the city live

that had dared to dethrone Rome! The hordes of the Forest and the Desert avenged the wrongs of the Scipii and the Julii. It was but just?"

"As the soldiers of Islam avenged the gods of Greece. Aphrodite perished that Arians might rage, and the beautiful mythus was swept away, that hell and the devil might be believed in instead! When the Crescent glittered there, it half redressed the wrongs of your Olympus."

"And we reign still!"

She turned, as she spoke, towards the western waters, where the sea-line of the Ægean lay, while in her eyes came the look of a royal pride and of a deathless love.

"Greece cannot die! No matter what the land be now, Greece—*our* Greece—must live for ever. Her language lives; the children of Europe learn it, even if they halt it in imperfect numbers. The greater the scholar the humbler he still bends to learn the words of wisdom from her schools. The poet comes to her for all his fairest myths, his noblest mysteries, his greatest masters. The sculptor looks at the broken fragments of her statues, and throws aside his Calliope in despair before those matchless wrecks. From her, soldiers learn how to die, and nations how to conquer and to

keep their liberties. No deed of heroism is done but, to crown it, it is named parallel to hers. They write of love, and who forgets the Lesbian? They dream of freedom, and to reach it they remember Salamis. They talk of progress, and while they talk, they sigh for all that they have lost in Academus. They seek truth, and while they seek, wearily long, as little children, to hear the golden speech of Socrates, that slave, and fisherman, and sailor, and stonemason, and date-seller were all once free to hear in her Agora. But for the light that shone from Greece in the breaking of the Renaissance, Europe would have perished in its Gothic darkness. They call her dead!—she can never die while her life, her soul, her genius breathe fire into the new nations, and give their youth all of greatness and of grace that they can claim. Greece dead! She reigns in every poem written, in every art pursued, in every beauty treasured, in every liberty won, in every god-like life and god-like death, in your fresh lands, which, but for her, would be barbarian now."

Where she stood, with her eyes turned westward to the far-off snows of Cithæron and Mount Ida, and the shores which the bronze spear of Pallas Athene once guarded through the night and day, the dark light in her eyes deepened, and the flush

of a superb pride was on her brow—it seemed Aspasia who lived again, and who remembered Pericles.

He looked on her, with the glow of passion on his face, made nobler by the poet's thoughts that were awaking in him. He was silent, for his heart was lulled with the oppression of his love, as the great forests are silenced before the storm.

She had forgotten his presence, standing there in the hush of the midnight, with the Byzantine city to the eastward, and to the west the land that had heard Plato—her thoughts were far away among the shadows of the past, the great past, when the Io Triumphe had been echoed up to the dim majesty of the Acropolis, and the roses had drooped their fragrant heads on the gracious gold of Alcibiades' love-locks.

He knew that he was forgotten, yet his heart did not reproach her; she was far above him in his sight, far as the stars that shone now above Athens, and his love was one that would take neglect and anguish silently, without swerving once from its loyalty. He would have laid his life down to be pressed out in agony, so that it should have given her one passing moment of pleasure, as a rose is thrown under a woman's foot to be crushed as she

steps, that dying it may lend a breath of fragrance to the air she breathes.

"You are born with genius, you are made for sovereignty, and I have nothing that is worthy to bring you;" he said long after, while his voice sank very low. "Only—only—remember, if ever you need it, one man's life will be yours to be lost for you."

She started slightly where she leaned, with her musing eyes resting on the west; she had forgotten his presence, and his words, though they told her no more than she knew, startled her still with their suddenness. The look of disdainful pain that he had seen before come on her face—the disdain was not for him—but the smile that already to him was the only sun the world held, lingered on her lips a moment.

"A year's pain to a true life—a day's pain, an hour's!—were far more than mine were worth. The daughter of Emperors you called me?—the daughter of men who gamed away their birthright, and played with diadems as idiot children play with olive-stones! Is there much greatness there? Genius! —if I have it, I have sold it, shamed it, polluted it. As for you—I have had so many die for me, I am tired of the shadow of the cypress!"

Strange though the words were, no vanity of power spoke in them, but a fatal truth, a mournful earnestness, tinged by, deepened to, remorse; the shadow of the cypress seemed to fall across the brilliancy of her face as she uttered them.

"Then,—will you let me live for you?"

The words escaped him before he knew they were uttered, before he realised all they meant, before he was conscious what he offered and pledged to a stranger who, for aught he knew or could tell, might be the head of an illustrious race, the wife of one of the royal chiefs of the Levant or of the East, or—might be anything that Europe held of what was most evil, most fatal, most dangerous in her sex.

She looked at him with a long, earnest, unwavering look,

"It is well for you that I will not take you at your word. No!—your life is a noble, gallant thing; treasure its liberty, and never risk it in a woman's hands."

The calmness with which she put aside words that had been nothing less than a declaration of the love he bore her, the serenity with which her gaze had dwelt on him, were not those of a woman who did or who would give him answering tenderness; yet the tone, the glance with which she had spoken,

had not been those of one to whom he was wholly indifferent, or to whom his words had been repugnant. It seemed as though she would never let him come to her as a lover, yet as though she would never let him free himself from the sway of her fascination; she refused his homage with easy and delicate grace, but she refused so that she showed that the man who had been saved by her in the depths of the Carpathian Pass had her interest and had her pity.

Noting—and for once having compassion for the deadly pain that she had dealt, she smiled on him; she talked to him of a thousand things with her rich and graphic eloquence, that charmed the ear like the flowing of music, and often sank to silence that only lent it rarer charm; she sang the chants of Bach, of Pergolesi, of Mozart; she let him stay with her till night had closed over the distant mosques and courts of Constantinople, and she bade him good night, leaning again over the marble parapet of the terrace, with the moonlight full upon her, as she gave him such a sign of adieu, just so proud, just so gentle, as Mary Stuart might have given to her Warden of the Marches while yet she knew his love and would not yield him hers.

Yet—ere many moments passed—another suc-

ceeded him; a head cooler than his felt the charm of the scene and the hour,—a pulse slower than his beat time fast, under the challenge of Idalia's eyes.

His rival was alone with her.

Erceldoune set no store on any single quality he possessed; was ignorant indeed of much of his own value; acted greatly not seldom, but never thought so by any hazard; did straightly, instinctively, and without preface or ornament that which seemed to him the need of the hour, the due of his manhood; held his course boldly and carelessly amongst men, caring nothing for their praise, as little for their censure; had quick, fiery blood in him that took flame rapidly; had, on the other hand, much earnestness, much tenacity, much tenderness, more far than he knew; had kept through his wandering life a heart singularly unworn, a mind singularly without guile; was naturally prone to good faith in men and incapable of base suspicion, and was certain whenever he did love to love to his own destruction, as such natures not seldom do. His rival was his reverse in every quality,—cool, wary, impenetrable under an airy semblance of nonchalance, vain, with the pardonable if overweening vanity of un-

usual powers, firmly conscious of themselves, inordinately ambitious, but even that in a keen, critical and studiously systematic manner, the Anglo-Venetian thought Erceldoune nothing more than a fine animal physically, and half a fool mentally, underrating what was dissimilar to himself with an error not uncommon with minds of his stamp, when their disdainful egotistic measurement has not been corrected by the experiences of a long life. Yet, widely diverse though they were, and utterly contrasted in every iota, the one who never resisted his passion, and never thought of her save with such chivalrous trust and absolute self-abandonment as were instinctive to his temperament, was scarcely more a prey to it than the other, who, with his love, blended a thousand threads of policy, design, and covetous intrigue, and hated it for having stolen on him, hated it for halting on his lips, hated it for levelling him with the herd he had so contemptuously despised; hated it because, for the first time, he had found a talent stronger, a logic surer, and a perception keener and subtler, and courage more daring and careless than his own; because, in fine, he had found his master, and found it in a woman.

This, a knowledge not easily to be pardoned by

one like him, made a certain acrid jealousy, a certain smartened bitterness, tinge even the passion into which she had surprised him when the dark eyes of Idalia glanced over him and read thoughts he had fancied unbetrayed by speech or sign, or when her careless ironies smote him back with the polished, piercing weapons of his own sceptic indifference, his own unyielding philosophies, which were as real in her as they had been till late in him.

For many years this woman had been but a name to him; only a name, through a succession of hazards, that had time after time kept their meeting deferred; but a name that had given a personality to him, and had been interwoven with many of the more critical essays and enterprises of his career.

Moving through the gore-stained, artillery-trodden maze of Lombardic fields, where in some unrewarded skirmish, young, eager, patriotic lives had been shot down by the troops of Austria, gasping to their latest breath "Italia fara da se!" he had stood beside some shattered wreck of brightest manhood that had fallen there, down head-first into the yellowing wheat, and when he had thought all life was dead in that broken mass, above which the tangled corn-stalks nodded and met in summer

winds, he had caught a last sigh, a last breath in which, the name of Idalia was blent with the name of Italy, and died together with it down the Lombard breeze. Travelling once through Russian steppes of snow in the decline of the year, when all nature was perishing, and the great bleak versts of whitened plain stretched out unbroken to Siberian desolation, he had found a prisoner working in fetters,—a haggard, blear-eyed, scarcely human thing, livid with the hue of the lead-mines, disfigured with the ravages of frost-bite, idiotic, with a strange dull stupor, that made him utter incessantly as he toiled in a gang, one word alone; and, he had known that in this wretched creature was the wreck of what once had been the finest, the most fiery, the most glittering of all the aristocratic soldiery of Poland; and that the word he muttered ever as he laboured was that which had been his ignis fatuus, his idol, his ruin,—Idalia. In his own Venice, he had once seen a terrible struggle: it was when a mere lad of Venetia, a child of seventeen years, with the clear wild noble eyes of a young eastern colt, had been brought in amongst others who were "rebels," and was given over to the rods that he might tell who his chiefs and his comrades were; the boy was frail of make, and

weakened with gunshot wounds, and he reeled and fell thrice under the rain of Austrian blows, but his teeth clenched on his tongue, and bit it through, so that no speech should pass it, and when the strokes told at last more mortally than those who lashed him knew, he smiled as he murmured, though his mouth was full of blood, "Tell her I died silent!"—and he who had heard had sent the farewell message to Idalia, at whose bidding that silence was kept. Once on the brow of a steep hill, looking over the Moravian highlands, with the wide wastes of barren grasslands, mingled with jagged piles of bare rock or stunted larches, with here and there the sharp peaks of a pine belt to break the outline, and the angry lustre of a red evening fading out in the hot autumn skies, he had seen a Monarch, the centre of a little knot of Cuirassier officers, draw near, and look hardly and eagerly across to the westward, where, far as the eye could reach, a dark shadow, like a hovering bird above the stony plains, marked the place where the Uhlans rode down on a fugitive's wake; and when reeking and breathless and spent, the troopers dragged their weary horses backward without the prize they had pursued, he had heard the Kaiser mutter in the gloaming of the night, "I would give a province for that one woman!" and

that woman had been Idalia. She had been long thus a name on his ear, and in his schemes, and when at last she had become known to him, he had learned to wonder no more at the name's magic.

To tell her this he had never ventured, really audacious as his temper was: circumstances united them closely in some things, but with all his tact and all his daring, he had never been able to seduce himself into the self-flattery of deeming that she would heed his love-words. She heard so many, the story had no attraction for her; and apart from his own sense of how contemptuously careless she was of how men suffered for her, was the reluctance of chafing pride to acknowledge that he also paid the life-coin of his surrender to one who could tempt like Calypso, and remain cold as Casta Diva, while her spells worked.

Yet he could not restrain one mark of the passion—jealousy—as he sat that night beside her, in the dining-hall of the Turkish villa, and stretched himself from his pile of cushions to lift from the carpet a white riding glove, that caught his eye where it lay.

"A stray waif of our beggared laird's, is it not, madame? He has been here to-day?"

"If you mean Sir Fulke Erceldoune, he only left

an hour or so ago. I wonder you did not meet him."

"No; I saw nothing of him. The Moldavian bullet did him good service, since it has won him so much of your interest. He should be vastly indebted to it!"

She laughed a little.

"Surely, a shot in the lungs is not so very pleasant a matter that a man need be grateful for it."

"Are there not many who risked shots far more mortal than his in the mere hope to win what they never did, but he does—your pity?"

She shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly.

"Why should you imagine I pity him? Have you not seen him *here?*"

The emphasis spoke more than volumes could have done. Her companion bowed his head.

"True! The real mercy would have been—exclusion! Yet pity him you do, miladi, since you bade me 'harm him at my peril!'"

She looked at him such a curiously fixed regard, that had a hundred meanings in it.

"Let us make an end of this fencing," she said, quietly. "There are none here to dupe. We can speak frankly. We have done this man

quite evil enough without bringing more upon him."

"We! I fail to apprehend you—"

She gave a little gesture of impatience.

"Monsieur, you have not known me very long, or you would know me too well to attempt those tactics. Evasion answers nothing with me; and why should we attempt it? Our cause is the same, and we both are equally aware that this brave-hearted gentleman was the prey of its viler adherents."

"But——"

"Pardon me; I have said we both know it. I have grace enough to blush for it: and you——?"

For the moment a faint flush of shame kindled over his face; he was for the moment silenced, embarrassed, uncertain how to reply; he had never dreamed that his share in the Carpathian attack—which his intelligence had directed unseen, though his hand was not active, nor his complicity involved in it—had been suspected by her, and he was now almost, for the first time in his life, astray in the twilight of bewildered doubts, of intricate apprehensions.

She laughed slightly again.

"Ah! I told you you did not know me; you

thought you had deceived me! Well, never seek that again. A man once did: a man of Leghorn; he was clever and vain; he said, to himself, "*Altro*, a woman! and they obey her? I, for one, I will not; I will blind her.' And he thought he was strong enough. He stole away, like the fool that he was, and carried his scheme with him—his scheme to treat with Austria unknown to us; unknown, he thought, to the very walls of the room he slumbered in, to the very river reeds he walked by, he thought himself so strong. But I learnt it."

"And then?"

"Then? Why then I taught him what such an error cost."

"And that cost was?"

"What he merited. It had been better for him that he had never been born."

A chill, of something that was almost fear, passed over her listener's cold, keen, courageous nature; he, too, held that which was concealed from her,—if she avenged treachery thus?

"Vengeance, Madame?" he said, scarcely caring what triviality of speech served to screen his thoughts. "Surely nothing so barbarous lingers amidst so much worldly wisdom, nothing so ferocious harbours amidst so much divine witchery?"

"Revengeful? No. I do not think I am that; though one knows ill one's own errors. It is easy to forgive; we scorn where we pardon, but we pardon *because* we scorn."

She spoke musingly, with a grave and weary meditation as though memory, and not his words, usurped her: then, suddenly, she shook away any darker remembrance that dwelt with her, and turned full on him brilliant, penetrating eyes of half-contemptuous questioning.

"Some one of you it was who wrought that glorious piece of honest work in the Carpathians. You see, they were afraid that I should know their scheme: they stole out to do it in darkness; they thought that I should never learn it. But it all came to me; simply enough. I found their victim and saved him; and when Marc Lassla dragged himself half dying to my lodge in the mountains, and gasped us out a lame history of a bear-play, telling that young Vlistchnau lay dead in the woods from the brute's embrace, the whole was clear enough to me. The dying man's and the dead one's injuries were both no bear's wounds, but the fruit of pistol bullets; and though Lassla breathed his last in an hour or so, saying no more, I knew well enough that they had both been shot down by the Scot, and

that the planned attack had been done by my people;—by mine!"

There was a deadly bitterness in the last words, an ominous meaning: such as might have run through Catherine of Russia's speech when she found a vassal faithless.

"Your people!" His surprise was admirably feigned, but it did not deceive her.

"Never trouble yourself to assume ignorance!" she said, with a certain amusement at his discomfiture. "You knew very well of the plan——"

"On my honour——"

"Have we any of that quality amongst us to swear by?"

"Nay! as a gentleman, as a man, I declare to you I knew nothing of it."

She bowed her head; courteously, as one too highly-bred to accuse him; carelessly, as one too worldly-wise to believe him.

"Nothing!" he averred, irritably mortified by that unspoken incredulity. "You may believe me, madame; from my policies, if not my virtues, I am totally opposed to every sort of violence; deem it ill-advised, uncivilised, barbaric: invariably give my veto against it. Force is the weapon of savages; learning has done little for us if we cannot find a

better, a surer, a more secret tool. To prevent the wild spirits that join us from following their brute instincts, and blundering headlong into unwise action would be impossible. You can do more than most; but I doubt very much if you have not oftentimes roused tigers whom even you could not tame when once they had tasted of slaughter. The evil of every national movement is that the majority, once allowed to move at all, refuse to proceed by intellectual means, and loose themselves at once to physical violence, in which every good thing is lost, every temperate voice drowned. It is this sort of fatal misconception from which such criminal essays as that which attacked Sir Fulke Erceldoune proceed: it is impossible to avoid their appearing alike expedient and pardonable to a certain class of characters."

The explanation was given with graceful ease, with eloquent address: she heard it with courtesy, also with incredulity.

"Yes; and that 'class' serve as excellent weapons for brilliant intelligences which need to use them; excellent scapegoats for such intelligences when they do not care to appear in the intrigues they suggest."

He felt the thrust, yet he parried it with seeming tranquillity.

"That is but too true, indeed, and the unscrupulousness is not, alas! on the side of the mere *mauvais sujets*. Apropos, madame, you know all things; who then was the leader of the Carpathian episode?"

A stern impatience passed for an instant over the splendour of her face, mingled with something of more wounded pain.

"You must know too well whom I supposed to be so."

The answer was very low; there was a thrill of passionate shame in it.

"Ah!" There was a whole world of gentle sympathy, of profound comprehension in the deep breath he drew. "Was he not then implicated?"

She lifted her head and looked at him long and steadily: there was more than contemplation in the look. "You can better tell that than I."

"No. Indeed you wrong me, madame. May I hear what you think yourself now we are on the subject."

A scorn that she repressed in utterance flashed with a weary darkness in her eyes.

"I would have sworn—*Yes*. He has sworn to me by the only name I ever knew him to hold sacred, *No*."

"Why doubt him, then?"

"*Why?* Ask me rather why, even on his oath, believe him!"

The impetuous disdain that burned through the retort had scathing satire in it. He looked at her with an admiration that was the more vivid because he thought her intentionally deceiving him, and thought also the deception so magnificently wrought out.

"Ah, ma belle Comtesse," he murmured, in his liquid flowing French, that both habitually used. "That you should have to feel this; that you should have to give such passion of contempt, to one so near to you! It is 'Athene to a Satyr.' How is it that, with such an inspiration as you beside him, Conrad has never ——"

She interrupted him; and with the ironical cold nonchalance of her common tone resumed,

"Count Phaulcon is at least *your* friend, monsieur; let that suffice to dismiss his name. I suspected him; I do still suspect him. Did I think that he had been on the Turkish shore last night, I should have certainty in lieu of suspicion; but in saying this to you I say no more than I have done, or shall do, to him himself."

"And to —— Monsieur Erceldoune?"

"No." The answer was rapid and peremptory.

She turned her head to him with something of the goaded impatience of a stag at bay mingling with her careless dignity. "How can you ask? You have heard him say he will kill his assassin if they ever meet. And he would be justified."

"And his 'justification' would free you not a little. Ah, where is there any sophism that will curve round to its own point so deftly as a woman's!" thought her companion, while he bent forward with a gentle deference in his air, a hesitating sympathy in his tone:

"Count Phaulcon is my very good friend, it is true, madame; and yet I scarce think I deserved to be reminded of that by a rebuke, because I cannot choose but regret that ——"

"Regret nothing at my score, monsieur."

"What! not even that which you yourself regret?"

"When I tell you that there is such a thing, not before."

"You are very cruel——"

"Am I? Well, I have no great liking for sympathy, and not much need for it. If one cannot stand alone, one deserves, I fancy, to fall. Poets have made an idol and a martyr of the sensitive plant; their use of it is an unwise allegory: to shrink at every touch, to droop at every stroke, to be at

the mercy of every hand, strange or familiar—an odd virtue that! It would not commend itself to me."

"True. Is sensitiveness much after all except vanity quick to be wounded, as the sea-dianthus that dies of a finger thrust at it? Believe me, I meant not to offer the insult of pity, scarcely dared to intend the familiarity of sympathy; I merely felt—forgive me if I say it—I have long known Conrad, I have but of late known you; can you not guess that the old and the recent friendship alike tell me that you, despite all your pride, indeed *because* of all your pride, are bitterly galled, are shamefully companioned by a life unworthy you?"

He paused; he had doubted in how far he might venture even thus much, for she was of a nature to which compassion was unendurable, a thing to be shunned far more than pain itself. He knew that already; had he never known he would have seen it in the barely perceptible quiver with which she drew away as a high-hearted and fearless hound will take its mortal wound, and refuse a sign of suffering.

"You say a fact too plain for me to give it denial," she said, chilly; "but it is also one that I must decline to discuss with you. Let us talk of other matters."

Even her companion's long-trained audacity was not bold enough to force her on a theme she thus refused.

"Forgive me," he murmured hurriedly, "it is hard sometimes not to speak out one's thoughts."

"I thought the hardship rather lay in being sometimes compelled to do so."

"You *will* jest!——"

"Well, jests are better than tragedies. Life is always jostling the two together."

"We are like enough to have one tragedy, madame, if that hotheaded courier's suspicions point the same way as yours do,"—he spoke irritably, inconsequently; for he was both checked and incensed.

"It is not likely they will ever do so."

"Why? Suppose—merely suppose—your fear aright, and that Conrad and your new friend ever meet under your roof; what then?"

She did not reply for a moment, whilst a shadow of many memories, tinged with something of a smile passed over her features.

"What then? Why then I should know the truth of this matter, which *Monsieur mon ami* here refuses to tell me."

He felt the sting; and he knew that he had better provoke no more encounters with a woman's wit.

And being piqued he wronged her, as pique commonly wrongs those who have provoked it; and thought that she knew far more of this thing than even he himself.

CHAPTER XII.

"LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI."

WHEN he also had left her, she leaned awhile over the terrace-parapet, with her eyes musingly dropped on the shelving mass of myrtle blossom, and as she stood there in her solitude, a step hurriedly crushed the fallen leaves of pomegranate flowers; before she saw him, a man had thrown himself before her, pressing his lips on the trailing folds of her laces, kneeling there as one kneels who sues for life.

"Idalia!"

She started and looked down; and drawing herself from his clasp with the gesture of her habitual haughty grace, turned from him without a word, bending her head with a silent salutation.

"Idalia!—I have come only to look upon your face."

The vibration of intense suffering in his voice made her involuntarily pause: but when she spoke it was with a calm indifference, a pointed meaning.

"I do not receive this evening, Monsieur; did not my people inform you so?"

A quick shudder shook him; he it was who had worn the badge of the Silver Ivy, and had answered Victor Vane with three brief pregnant words—"To my cost!" To his cost, his most bitter cost, he had loved her, and he had forced his way to her here in the quiet of the night. He grasped again the hem of her dress, and held her there, looking upward to that fair and fatal face in the radiance of the full moon shining from the sea.

She had destroyed him:—but he could not look on her without growing drunk with his own idolatry as men grow drunk with wine.

"Idalia! have you no pity—no remorse? You know what you have made me, and you give me no mercy? Is your heart stone?"

No change came on her face; she smiled with a negligent disdain.

"You have studied at the Porte St. Martin! That is not the way we speak anywhere else in Paris."

There was a contemptuous languor in the words more cruel than the bitterest utterance, in earnest, would have been; with scenes and hours so vivid in his memory, in which his love had been lavished at

her feet, and sunned in her smile, and welcomed by her word, they struck on him as passing all that history had ever held of women's traitorous heartlessness.

Idalia was now—what much evil done to her had made her.

His hands clenched on her dress in a convulsive wretchedness.

"Have you no heart, no soul, no conscience? I laid down all I had on earth for you; I gave you my peace, my honour, my abject slavery. And yet——"

His voice died inarticulate, while the light from the sea fell on his upturned face—a face of fair and gallant cast, of ancient race, and leonine blood, in the early prime of manhood, yet now worn, haggard, drawn, and darkened with the hopeless passions that were loosening in him beyond all strength to hold them.

She looked down on him, still without change of glance or feature. It was a tale so often told to her. She drew herself from him with her coldest indolence.

"You came here to tell me this? It was scarcely worth while. Good evening."

Like a deer stung by a shot he started to his feet, standing between her and the shafts of jasper

that formed the portico into the building; the endurance that had laid him at her mercy, suffering all things for her sake, living only in the light of her smile, and knowing no law but her desire, broke its bondage now and turned against her in fierce but just rebuke, incoherent in its misery.

"It is true, then, what they say! You have a heart of bronze, a soul of marble? You have that glory of your loveliness only to draw men in your net and hurl them to perdition? It is true, then! in worshipping you we worship the fairest traitress, the most angelical lie that the world ever saw? Have you ever thought what it is you do? Have you ever asked yourself what price *we* pay for the power you hold? Have you ever thought that you may tempt us, and betray us, and destroy us once too often, till your very slaves may turn against you?"

He stood alone with her in the lateness of the night, his words incoherent and crushed between his teeth; and she knew that she had done him wrong which before now has turned men into fiends, and has made them stamp out into its grave the beauty that has beguiled them and betrayed them. But she gave no sign of fear; her dauntless nature knew fear no more than any Spartan knew it. Her

conscience alone smote her, a pang of remorse wakened in her. She was silent, looking at him in the shadowy moonlight; she knew that she had ruined his life — a high-souled, patriotic life, full of bright promise and of fearless action—a life laid subject to her, and broken in her hands as a child breaks the painted butterfly.

"God!" he cried, and it was the involuntary cry of a great despair that broke his force down before the woman by whom he had been fooled and forsaken, yet whom he still worshipped but the more the more that he condemned her. "That such beauty should only veil a heart of steel! If you had ever loved—if ever you could love—you could not do such treachery to love as this. I know you as you are, now—now that it is too late, and yet—and yet——"

A single sob choked his voice, he threw himself again at her feet in the sheer blindness of an utter misery, his hands clutching the folds of her dress, his lips pressed in kisses on the senseless laces, conscious alone of the woman who now had no more thought, or need, or tenderness for him than the cold marble that rose above him into the starry stillness of the Bosphorus night.

"And yet there is no crime I would not take on

me at your word—there is no sin I would not sin for you! I know you as you are—and yet, so utterly in spite of all, I love you! I came to-night to see your face once more. I go to die for Italy. Say one last gentle word to me; we shall never meet again on earth."

She stood there, above him, in the clear radiance shining from the waters; his words had struck deep to the core of the remorse that was slowly awaking in her; a profound pity for him, as profound a loathing of herself, arose; all the gentler, purer, nobler nature in her was touched, and accused her more poignantly than the most bitter of his accusations. She stooped slightly; her proud instincts, her habit of power, and her world of levity and mockery, made her yield with difficulty, made her pity with rarity; but when she did either, she did them as no other woman could.

She stooped slightly, and her eyes were heavy as they rested on him:

"I have but one word: Forgive me!"

And *in* that one word Idalia spoke more than could have been uttered in the richest eloquence that could have confessed her error and his wrong. Yet while she said it, she knew that both the sin and the injury were beyond all pardon.

He looked up, hope against hope flashing in on him one moment: it was quenched as soon as born; her face had pain on it, but the light that he had once seen there was gone—there was no tenderness for him.

His head sank again:

"Forgive! I would have forgiven you death—I forgive you more than death. But if you ever meet again one who loves you as I have loved, remember me—and spare him."

The generous answer died in his throat; never again, he knew, would he look upon the loveliness that had betrayed him; he knew that he was going to his death, as surely as though he sank into the sea-depths glistening below, and that when he should lie in the darkness and decay of a forgotten soldier's grave, there would be no pang of memory for him in her heart, no thought that gave him pity or lament in the life to which his own was sacrificed.

He looked yet once again upward to her face, as dying men may look their last on what they treasure; then slowly, very slowly, as though each moment were a separate pang, he loosened his hold upon her, and turned and went through the shadows of the cypress, downward to where the waves were drearily breaking on the strand below.

Where he had left her, she stood silent, the moonlight falling on the white marble about her, till from the sea the lustre on her looked bright as day. In one thing alone had he wronged her. She knew the weariness of remorse, she knew the tenderness of pity.

Though no sign had escaped her, each word of his accusation had quivered to her heart; he did not feel its truth more bitterly than she. That upbraiding, poured out in the solitude of the night, had stirred her heart with its condemnation; it showed her what it was that she had done, it made her shudder from the fatal gift of her own dominion; how had she used it?

Again and again, till they had passed by her, no more noted than the winds that swept the air about her, the anguish of men's lives, the fire of their passions had been spent upon her, and been wasted for her; she had won love without scruple, embittered it without self-reproach. But now, her own heart for once was stirred.

"What do I do?" she asked herself. "Ruin their lives, destroy their peace, send them out to their deaths—and for what? A phantom, a falsehood, an unreality, that betrays them as utterly as I! The life I lead is but cruelty on cruelty, sin on

sin. I know its crime, and yet I love its sovereignty still. I am vile enough to feel the charm of its power, while I have conscience enough to abhor its work."

The thoughts floated through her mind where she stood, looking over to where the sea lay, the dark outline of some felucca alone gliding spirit-like across the moonlit surface.

The last words of the man who had left her seemed to echo still upon the air; the summons of conscience, the reproach of the past, the duty and the demand of the present, all were spoken in them. Even as he had uttered them, she had thought of one whose fate would be the same with this which now upbraided her, and pleaded with her. She knew that he should be spared. It might not be too late to save him—to save him from herself.

He who had left her to go out and find a soldier's death on the blood-soaked plains of Lombardy, stood between her and the other life which she had once saved from such a grave, and which now was in the first flush of faith that held her rather angel than woman, and of love that had sprung up, full grown in one short night, like a flower under tropical suns.

Better one pang for him at first than for a while the

sweetness of a cheated hope, to end in lifelong desolation, like that which had to-night risen before her, and arraigned her for its ruin.

"Most men in their passion love but their own indulgence; but now and then there are those who love us for ourselves; they should be spared," she thought, still standing, her face turned once more towards the sea.

They called her unscrupulous, she had been so; they called her heartless, merciless, remorseless, in all her poetic beauty; there had been too much truth in the charge; much error lay on her life, great ruin at her door; but of what this woman really was her foes knew nothing, and her lovers knew as little. With neither was she ever what she now was, looking on the white gleam of the surf where it broke up on the sands below—now, when she was musing how to save again, from herself, him whom she had once saved from the grave.

In the break of the morning Idalia rose; and thrusting back the green lattice of her casement glanced outward at the east. The loose silken folds of a Turkish robe floated round her, her face was pale with a dark shadow beneath the eyes, and her hair lay in long loose masses on her shoulders, now and then lifted by the wind. She was thinking

deeply and painfully, while her eyes followed mechanically the flight of white-winged gulls, as they swept in a bright cloud above the water. The reproaches that had been uttered to her a few hours before still had their sting for her, the truths with which they had been barbed still pierced her.

Proud, fearless, negligent, superbly indifferent to the world's opinion, contemptuous of its censure as she was careless of its homage, she still was not steeled against the accusation of her own heart and conscience. She was no sophist, no coward; she could look at her own acts and condemn them with an unsparing truth; though haughtily disdainful of all censure, she tore down the mask from her own errors, and looked at them fully, face to face, as they were. Erred she had, gravely, passing on from the slighter to the deeper, in that course which is almost inevitable, since no single false step ever yet could be taken *alone*.

The brightest chivalry, the noblest impulses, the most unquestioning self-sacrifice, the most headlong devotion, these had all been wakened by her, and lavished on her;—what had she done with them? Accepted them, to turn them to her tools; excited them, to make them her slaves and her creatures; won them and wooed them with sorceress charm to

weigh them with cold cruelty at their worth, and let them drift unpitied to their doom.

Those who had loved her had been no more to her than this; beguiled for the value they were, betrayed to passion that by it they might grow plastic to her purpose, bent to her command. She, who had all the superb, satiric, contemptuous disbelief in suffering of a woman of the world, still knew that, over and over again, the tide of grief had broken up vainly against the disdain of her delicate, pitiless irony; knew that over and over again a life made desolate, a life driven out to recklessness and desperation, a life laid down in the early glory of ambitious manhood, had been sacrificed through her, ruined by her, as cruelly, as carelessly as a young child destroys the brightness of the butterfly, the fragrance of the cowslip, in its sport of summer-day chase or spring-day blossom-ball. And for what? For the sake of triumphs that had palled in their gaining, for the sake of gains that were valueless now, for the sake of a sovereignty that seemed to brand her forehead with its crown, for the sake of evil things that had worn a fair mask, of freedom that had grown into slavery, of daring that had said, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

She had erred deeply; all that was noblest,

tenderest, most generous in her nature—and there was much still, despite the accusers that could appeal against her—knew it, and did not seek to palliate it to herself. The career that closed her in, once entered, as the net closes round the bird it ensnares, had wearied her, had revolted her, had made her pride contemn the part she played, her conscience plead against the woe she worked, her nature, grand in its mould and fearless in its courage, revolt from much that she had once voluntarily sought and confessedly loved in the earlier years when it was fresh to her. And she was not happy: the simplicity of the aged recluse at Monastica had pierced to a truth that Paris, and the world, and the men who glittered round her and adored her, did not perceive. She was not happy. With her brilliance, her power, her enterprise, the fineness of her intricate intrigues, the daring of her constant adventures, the excitement of her incessant changes, no morbid sentiment, no passive pensiveness could have hold on her or be known to her, but something deeper than this was at her heart; it was the melancholy of a mute remorse, the unavailing and vainly-silenced lament of one who finds that he has bartered his gold for stones.

Her eyes were weary in all their splendour, as

they followed the flight of the sea-gulls. She thought of what she had been, when only sixteen seasons had warmed the lustre of her hair, yet had made her Hellenic beauty in its early blush and sudden maturity almost, even then, the beauty of her present womanhood; she thought of herself as she had stood one evening at sunset leaning down over the ivy-mantled ruins of an antique bridge in Greece, looking across to the Ægean, flashing in the light, and thinking of the centuries far away in the distance of the past when those waves had broken against the prows of Miltiades' galleys, and been crowded with the fleets of Salamis; she remembered the vivid and decorated eloquence that had wooed her then to her present path, murmuring such bright words of liberty and triumph, while the waters in their melody and the sunset in its splendour seemed filled with the grand dead names of Gracchan Rome and of Socratic Athens; she remembered how the proud imagination of her dawning life had leapt to those subtle temptings as an arrow leaps from the bow into the empyrean, and had seen in its ambitious and still child-like dreams the sovereignty of Semiramis, the sway of Aspasia, the empire of Maria Theresa, waiting in the future for her.

Eight years had gone by since then, and she had

known the world deeply, widely, wisely; she had been sated with homage and with victory, she had wakened love almost wherever her glance fell; her hours had been filled with vivid colour and incessant variety, with luxury and with pleasure, with the life of an adventuress in its airy nonchalance mingled with all the grace and elegance of patrician tastes, and habits, and wealth. And yet she was not happy; for the fame she had was notoriety, the power she had was used unscrupulously, in the core of the rose there was always an asp, and in the depth of her heart there were disappointment, remorse, and dishonour.

"And yet I was more sinned against than sinning," she mused. "I was so young then, and I was allured with such glorious beguilement. The regeneration of nations, the revolution of empires, the striking off of the serf's fetters, the redressing of every unjust balance, the conquest of empires and liberties, the people's homage and the monarchs' crowns,—those were what tempted me. It was the old fable of Satan and Eve: 'Eat of this fruit, and ye shall have the knowledge of heaven and earth;' 'Believe in me, follow me, and you shall have glory beside which Paradise is poor, kingdoms beside which Eden is a desert!' And I took the fruit.

How could I tell then that it would be all a lie?"

The thoughts floated through her mind, leaning there wearily against the lattice, while the early wind of the warm dawn stirred the half-opened scarlet blossoms of the japonica twining round it. But she was too integrally proud to seek refuge or exculpation in self-excuses even in her solitary reverie.

"Yet that is but half the truth," she mused, while her eyes still unconsciously followed the sweep of the sea-birds out to sea. "I was sinned against then, in the first, but it has been my own wrong since. I have kept to error long since I have known it to be error. I have loved my power even while I despised its means and its ends. I have felt the intoxication of hazard till I have let it entangle me beyond recal. I have known the evil I did, yet I have not paused in it when I might. I have seen the fatal issue of so much, and I have gone on and on. I have bound them, I have blinded them, I have despoiled them, I have taken their strength and their manhood, their faith and their courage, their wealth and their genius, and ruined them all. I have spared none of them. I have betrayed so many. *That* has not been done in ignorance—*that*

has not been palliated with the excuse of youth scarce conscious what it does."

Her thoughts travelled far over past years, while the sun rose higher, and while the man whose existence she had given back dreamed of her with the waking of the day, as of one so far above his love, that

> "No head save some world-genius should rest
> Above the treasures of that perfect breast."

She remained still and silent at the casement till the distant call of the drums, as the Soldan went up to the mosque for the sunrise prayers, died softly away on the air.

"I will save him at least. One sharp blow—and perhaps he will forget. Pride will aid him; and if we never meet again, I shall remain only a dream to him—a dream without pain," she said, half aloud. And, for the moment, a darker shadow swept over her face; she remembered loyal eyes that had gazed their eager passion into hers; she remembered leonine strength that would have been felled into its tomb but for her; she remembered that the man who had sought her with such untiring patience on the clue of one frail memory, would not forget in a day, in a year. But her resolve was not shaken.

"I will save him if he will be saved;—he, at least,

shall have nothing with which to reproach me," she thought, while she watched the grey sea flash between the scarlet blossoms of the japonica tendrils. Then she turned away from the window, and rang a hand-bell that had once belonged to Catherina Medici: like the one whose long slender palm had before touched the spiral column of its handle, she never hesitated in any course when her resolve was taken, she never swerved when once she had decided.

The Nubian slave, who attended her wherever she travelled as her maid, answered the summons from where she stood in the ante-chamber.

"Tell Paulus that I start for Naples this morning. He knows what to do. I leave by ten."

The Nubian bowed to the ground, and withdrew. Her mistress stood beside the table where the bell was placed, thoughtful still, with the shadow that had gathered on her deepening in the purple light that fell through violet curtains near. She was not a woman to whom regret was familiar;—many would have said she was too heartless: it was rather because she had seen, and known, and penetrated too much to be lightly touched;—but a great tearless pain gathered in her eyes, and her hand closed with a gesture of impatience on the sharp metal circle of the bell.

"He will be stung to the heart—and yet, better one pang at once!" she said in her solitude. "What could it avail him to know me more except to suffer longer?"

Her resolve was not changed; vacillation was impossible to her; she had none of its weakness in her nature, but a regret poignant and almost remorseful was on her. She thought of the fearless fidelity with which he had refused ever again to become as a stranger to her, she thought of the fealty that she knew so well he bore to her, that had looked out from the ardent worship of his eyes in the calm of the eastern night a few short hours before.

And she was about to kill this at a blow, because the prayer of another had pierced her heart and pleaded with her to spare him, if it were not too late.

A new life had dawned on Erceldoune.

All his old habits of soldier-like decision, of sportsman-like activity, were broken up; he who had used to find his greatest pleasures in the saddle and the rifle, in waiting high up in a leafy nest for the lions to come down to the spring to drink, and in riding wild races with Arabs over amber stretches

of torrid sand, in spending whole days alone among the sedge-pools of the Border fowl, and in bivouacking through a scorching night with Brazillian guachos, had now changed into the veriest dreamer that ever let the long hours steal away,

> "——floating up, bright forms ideal,
> Half sense-supplied, and half unreal,
> Like music mingling with a dream."

He lived in a land of enchantment, whose sole sunlight was a woman's glance; he gave himself up without a struggle to the only passion that had ever touched his life. Now and then forebodings swept over him; now and then his own utter ignorance of the woman to whom he was yielding up his destiny, smote him with a terrible pang, but very rarely: in proportion to the length of his resistance to such a subjugation, was the reckless headlong force of his fall into its power. Moreover, his nature was essentially unsuspecting; and he had an old-world chivalry in him that would have made it seem to him the poorest poltroonery to cast doubt on the guardian-angel who had saved him from the very jaws of death. His mother, lost in his earliest childhood, had been of Spanish race; neglected by her lord, she had been left to break her spirit as she would against the grey walls of the King's Rest,

longing for the perfume and the colour and the southern winds of her home in the Vega, while the Border moors stretched round her, and the Cheviots shut her in until she died, like a tropic bird, caged in cold and in twilight. A softness, inherited from the tenderness and the enthusiasm of her southern blood, was latent in her son, little as he knew it; an unworldliness and trustfulness were in his nature, though he did not perceive them; and though his career had done much to strengthen the lion-like daring and athlete's hardihood of his character, on the other hand the picturesque colouring and varied wandering in which his years had been spent had done much to preserve the vein of romance within him, unworn while unsuspected. Nothing had touched this side of his nature until now; and now, the stronger for its past suppression, it conquered him in its turn, and ruled alone.

When he left her that evening he could not sleep; he rode far and fast through the late night, dashing down into the interior, along sandy plains, and through cypress groves, across stretches of tangled vegetation, and over the rocky beds of dried-up brooks, or the foam of tumbling freshets. The swift rush through the cooled air soothed the fever in

him; his thoughts and his passions kept throbbing time with the beat of the hoofs, with the sweep of the gallop.

So long ago loved his namesake the Rhymer, when under the tree of Erceldoune—the Tree of Grammarye — the sorceress-lips touched his, and the eyes brighter than mortal brightness looked into his own; lips that wooed him across the dark Border, eyes that dared him to brave the Lake of Fire for her sake. Those old, old legends!—how they repeat themselves in every age, in every life.

With the dawn he came upon a pool, lying land-locked, far and solitary, encircled with cedars and cypress and superb drooping boughs, now heavy with the white blossoms of the sweet chesnut, and while his horse drank at the brink, he threw himself in to bathe, dipping down into the clear brown waters, and striking out into the depths of green blossoming shade, while the swell of a torrent that poured into it lashed him with its foam, cold even in the east before sunrise, and hurled the mass of water against his limbs, firm-knit, sinewy, colossal as the polished limbs of a Roman bronze of Milo. As he shook the drenching spray from his hair, and swam against the current, looking upward at the

sky where the dawn was just breaking, all the beauty that life might know seemed suddenly to rise on him in revelation. There is an eastern fable that tells how, when Paradise faded from earth, a single rose was saved and treasured by an angel, who gives to every mortal, sooner or later in his life, one breath of fragrance from the immortal flower—one alone. The legend came to his memory as the sunbeams deepened slanting spear-like across the azure of the skies, and he dashed down into the shock of the waters to still in him this fierce sweetness of longing for all that would never be his own.

One woman alone could bring to him that perfume of paradise; the rose of Eden could only breathe its divine fragrance on him from her lips. And he would have given all the years of his life to have it come to him one hour!

When the day was at noon he went to her, heeding no more the downpour of the scorching vertical rays than the Rhymer had heeded the leaping tongues of flame while he rode, with the golden tresses sweeping his lips, down to the glories of Faërie. Distinct thought, distinct expectance, he had none; he had but one instinct, to see her, to be with her, to lay down at her feet, the knightliest service that ever man gave to woman. He knew

nothing of her, knew not whether she were wedded or unwedded, but he knew that the world had one meaning alone for him now—he loved her. That she could ever answer it, he had barely the shadow of a hope; there was much humility in him; he held himself but at a lowly account; though a proud man with men, he would have felt, had he ever followed out his thoughts, that he had nothing with which to merit or to win the haughty and brilliant loveliness of Idalia; he would have felt that he had no title and no charm to gain her, and gather her into arms that would be strong, indeed, to defend her until the last breath of life, as they had been strong to strangle the bear in the death grasp and to tame the young wild horse on the prairies, but that had no gold to clasp and fling down at her feet, no purples of state and of wealth to fold round her, bringing their equal royalty to hers. That he himself could attract her, he would have had little belief; he did not see himself as others saw him; he did not know that his vigorous magnificence of form, his dauntless manhood, his generous unselfishness, his untrammelled freedom of thought and deed, might charm a woman who had been tired by all, won by none; he was unconscious of any of these in his own person, and he would

have thought that he had nothing on earth which could give him the right ever to hope for her tenderness. But hope is always strong in us till despair is forced on us, however little we may know that hope's existence; and thought was the last thing that was shaped in him—thought never grouped itself before him; he was still in the opium-dream: neither future nor past existed for him; he was drunk with his present; his love blinded him to any other memory than itself. It was too wholly in its early freshness for it to forecast its fate.

His eyes eagerly swept over the building as he rode up the avenue; the lattices were all closed; this was usual in the noon, yet it gave him a vague disquietude and dread. The echo of his step resounded on the marble, as it had done when he had forced his entrance into what he had believed the lair of his assassin: it was the only sound, and the stillness froze his heart like ice; the rolling bay of the hound had never before failed to challenge his arrival.

The first court was deserted; in the second he saw the Abyssinian.

"The Countess Vassalis?" he asked, rapidly.

"Is not here," answered the negress.

"Not here!"

"No, most illustrious. Her Excellency left Stamboul this morning."

He staggered like a man who has received a blow.

"Left—where?—why?—for how long?"

The Abyssinian shook her head with a profound salaam; she knew nothing, or would say nothing; her mistress had left Constantinople; where she intended to travel she could not tell; her Excellency was always travelling, she believed; but a note had been given her to deliver to the English Effendi, perhaps that might tell more.

He seized it from her as she drew it from the yellow folds of her sash, and tore it open; a mist was before his sight, and his wrist shook while he held the paper as it had never done lifting the rifle to his shoulder, when one error in the bullet's flight would have been instant death to himself. The letter brought him little solace; it was but a few words of graceful courtesy, giving him the adieu that a sudden departure rendered necessary, but adding nothing of why or whither she was gone, and seeming, in their polished ceremonial, cold as ice to the storm of shattered hope, and tempestuous pain that was rife in his own heart.

Instinctively as his hand closed on it he turned away from the Abyssinian, and went out of the court into the hot blaze of day, alone; he could not bear the eyes of even that African upon him in the desolation that had swept down upon his life. He went out; where, he did not see or know, passing into the scorching air and into the cooler shade of the groves, with a blind, dumb suffering on him like the suffering of a dog. For her he had no pride, against wounds from her hand he had no shield; and nothing with which she could wring his heart, nothing with which she could try his loyalty, could avail to turn his love away. They had been no idle words with which he had said that his life was hers to do with what she would; having made the vow he would keep it, no matter what the test, or what the cost.

He crushed in his grasp that pitiless letter;—her hand had touched it, her hand had written it, bitter as it was it was sacred to him; and he stood in the vertical sun, gazing blankly down on the waves below the terraces, tossing upward in the light at his feet. The blow had fallen on him with a crushing, sickening force,—again he had lost her! Again, when to the old baffled weariness with which he had so long vainly sought her was added the certainty

that he who had lavished his heart's best treasure on her was no more to her than the yellow sands that the seas kissed and left.

A few hours before and her eyes had smiled on him, her presence had been with him; she had listened to him, spoken with him, let him linger beside her in all the familiar communion of a welcome friendship; he could not realise that he was forsaken by her without a word, without a regret, without an effort for them ever to meet again. He had no claim on her remembrance, no title to her confidence, it was true; his acquaintance with her was slight, as the world would have considered. But he could not realise that the tie between them of a life saved, so powerful on him, so deathless in its memory for him, could be as nothing to her. The wanton cruelty of her desertion seemed to him so merciless that he had no remembrance of how little hold he had, in reason and in fact, upon her tenderness. The knowledge of her loss alone was on him, leaving him no consciousness save of the burning misery that possessed him.

As he had never loved, so he had never suffered until now; his adventurous career in camps, and cities, and deserts, had never been touched by any grief; he had come there in the gladness of the

morning, full of faith, of hope, of eager delight, and of unquestioning expectation, and he stood in the scorch of the noonday heat, stupified, the glare of sun and sea unfelt in the fiery agony that had seized him.

The little gilded caïque, was rocking at his feet, where it was moored to the landing-stairs; trifles link thought to thought, and with the memory of that first enchanted hour when he had floated with her down the water, he remembered the warning that she had given him—the warning "not to lie under the linden."

The warning had been—she had said—for his sake, not her own; was it for his that she had left him now? She had implied that some sort of peril, some threatening of danger, must await him with her friendship; was it to save him from these that she had left him thus? Then the humility that was as integrally a part of his nature, as his lofty pride of race was towards men, subdued the bitter sense of her cruelty: what was he more to her than any other to whom she gave her gracious courtesies, that he should look for recollection from her? He owed her his life;—but that debt lay on him, it left no claim to her. What was there in him that he could hope in their brief intercourse to

have become any dearer to her than any other chance-met acquaintance of the hour? He could not upbraid her with having smiled on him one hour to forsake him as a stranger the next, for with the outset she had bade him leave her unknown.

Hot tears, the first that had ever come there since as a child he had sobbed over his young mother's grave, rushed into his eyes, shutting out the stretch of the sparkling seas and the rich colouring around him, where Cashmere roses and Turkish lilies bloomed in untrained luxuriance. The sea had no freedom, the flowers no fragrance, the green earth in its early summer no beauty for him;—he cnly felt that let him spend loyalty, fidelity, life and peace upon her as he would, he might never be one shadow nearer to her than he was now, he might never touch her to one breath of tenderness, never move her to one pang of pity. His strength was great, he had wrestled with the gaunt northern bear in the cold of a Scandinavian night, he had fought with ocean and storm in the madness of a tropical tempest, he had closed with the African lion in a fierce embrace, and wrenched the huge jaws apart as they closed on their prey; he had prevailed in these things by fearless force, by human might: but

now, in his weakness and his misery, he could have flung himself down on the tawny sands and wept like a woman for the hopes that were scattered, for the glory that was dead.

Another moment, and he had crossed the labyrinth of the garden, thrown himself into saddle, and turned back towards the city. The Greeks idly lying under the shelter of their fishing or olive feluccas drawn up on the shore, and the Turks sitting on their cocoa-nut mats under the shadow of fig-tree or vine at the entrance of their huts, stared aghast at the breathless horse, thundering along the sea-road through the noontide heat, his flanks covered with foam, and the white burnous of his Giaour rider floating out upon the wind. Down the steep pathways, over the jagged rocks, across the flat burning levels of sand, and under the leaning grape-covered walls, Erceldoune rode, reckless of danger, unconscious of the fierce sun-fire pouring on his head.

He had sworn to follow her, whether her route were seaward to Europe, or eastwards into the wild heart of Asia. Pride, reason, wounded feeling, wavering faith, none of them availed to turn him from his course. He was true to his oath; and the madness was upon him that in the golden verse of

his namesake the Rhymer makes Syr Tristam love better to go back to the risk of death and shame, to the land of his foe, to the old piercing pain and the old delicious sorcery, than to live in peace and honour and royalty without the smile of King Marc's wife, without the light of Ysonde's eyes. Let come what would, he followed Idalia.

In the love he bore her there was a strange mingling of utter humility, of most reverential chivalry, with the wildest passion and the most reckless daring; in it the two sides of his nature were blent.

He rode to the Golden Horn, where the flags of every nation were streaming from the crowded masts in the clear hot light. He knew that her departure by any one of the vessels could easily be ascertained.

To seek the guests whom he had met at her house to inquire of her from the numerous acquaintance he had among the various chancelleries in Constantinople, and the military and naval men passing through or staying off there; to ask who she was, whence she came, how she was held in social estimation; all that might have been the natural course of most was impossible to Erceldoune. He could not have brought himself to speak of her to others; he felt that if he heard her name lightly

uttered he should strike his hand on the mouth that uttered it; and intense as his longing might be to pierce the mystery that apparently shrouded her, the Quixotic code of his love and his honour would have let him ask nothing through strangers that she withheld herself. He prosecuted his search alone, and the rapidity in such investigations gained by habit soon brought him the knowledge he pursued.

Before evening he had learned among the sailors in the port that a steam yacht belonging to her, the *Io*, which had returned twenty-four hours previously from Athens, had taken its departure early in the morning; for Capri, the Greek crew had said, with no one on board but herself, her suite, and the Russian dog. The yacht was probably by now through the Dardanelles. It was well known in the Golden Horn, the sailors told him, that she usually came from Europe in it; it could be recognised anywhere on the seas, for it always carried the green white and scarlet of the Italian national colours, crossed on the Greek ensign, a fancy, it was supposed, of her Excellency's.

Erceldoune's eyes strained across the glittering expanse of water with a wistful longing as he listened; every word he gathered plunged like a knife into his heart;—no steamer went from the harbour

that day to Naples; with twelve or twice twelve hours between them, how could he tell but what again she might be lost to him, how or where or when he might ever recover the clue she had rent asunder?

"If that schooner were only mine!" he muttered unconsciously aloud, as his glance fell on a yacht in the harbour, with her gold figure-head and her brass swivel-guns glistening in the sun;—his want of wealth he had never felt, his nature was too high toned, his habits too hardy, his temper too bold; but now for the first time the pang of his beggared fortunes struck heavily on him. Were wealth his own how soon the seas that severed them might be bridged!

A familiar hand was struck on his shoulder as he stood looking across at the grey arc of the Bosphorus, straining his eyes into the offing as though he could pierce the distance and follow her with his gaze.

"You want a yacht? Take *Etoile*. I am going inland on a special mission into Arabia; bring her back in a year's time, that will be soon enough for me."

Erceldoune turned and saw a man he knew well; a true and tried friend; one with whom

he had gone on many a perilous expedition; a dauntless traveller, a pure Arabic scholar, and a skilled negociator with Eastern chiefs and tribes.

The *Etoile* was at his service, with her captain and her crew, to take him where he would; there remained but the duties of the Messenger Service to detain him, and these, on application, let him loose. He had so habitually abstained throughout the twenty years of his service from any effort to shirk or shift the most dangerous or most irksome missions, that as nothing specially required him then, and a courier was daily expected from Russia who could take despatches home in his place, he easily obtained his furlough, and by sunset he weighed anchor.

The yacht steered out of the varied fleet of merchantmen that crowded the Golden Horn, steered out to the open sea, while the scarlet glory of the after-glow lingered in the skies and dyed the waters blood-red in its light. To what fate did he go? he asked himself.

Safer, wiser, better far, he thought, that he should turn back with his familiar comrade and plunge down into the core of Asia, into the old athletic, bracing, vigorous, open-air life, into the pleasures that had never palled of forest and rifle, of lake and mountain,

of the clear ringing shot and the wild day-dawn gallop, into the pastimes that had no taint in them, the chase that had no pang in it. That old life had been so free, so elastic, so unshadowed, with all the liberty of the desert, with all the zest of hardihood in it, with no thought for the morrow, and no regret for the past, with sleep sound as a mountaineer's, with strength exhaustless as the sea eagle's. He was leaving it. And for what? For a love that already had cost him a year of pain to a few short hours of hope; for a woman of whom he knew nothing, not even whether she were the wife or the mistress of another; for the miserable fever of restless passion, for the haunting torment of unattainable joys, for the intoxication of tempest-tossed desires, for the shadows of surrounding doubt and mystery. Better far let the strange charm that had enthralled him be cut away at any cost, and go back to that old life while there was yet time. The thought crossed him for the moment as he drifted from the quay of the Golden Horn. The next it passed as swiftly; let him plunge into the recesses of Asia or the green depths of Western wilds, he would carry with him his passion and her memory; and the schooner swept down beyond the Dardanelles in her pursuit, through the phosphor crests of starlit waves as the night deepened, and

the distance between them grew less and less with every dip the prow made down into the deep-grey glistening water, like a petrel that stoops to bathe in his passage, and shakes the spray from his spread wings to take a freer flight.

END OF VOL. I.

BRADBURY, EVANS, AND CO., PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

